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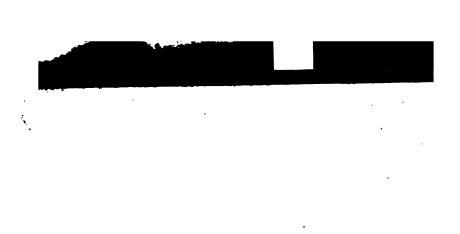
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FRANKS: DUELLIST

CHAPTER I

A WINDFALL

SATAN, I imagine, may be a contemplative old gentleman endowed with a fund of unlimited good humour and a capacity for tolerance truly astonish-He is the scapegoat of five continents, the execrated bogey of innumerable religions, the accredited possessor of almost omnipotent powers for working evil, and yet who has ever heard of him doing a mean thing or troubled to prosecute him in a police court? The fact is, I privately believe he does not exist. If he does I should be glad to meet him and take his hand. I feel sure I should find him such a right good fellow as myself, who has perhaps been compelled into diverse false positions by the force of circumstance. Circumstance is your true Demon, and his twin brother is a little black imp called Opportunity.

'That devil Franks,' was the title by which I was most generally misnamed—never, be it understood,

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to my face. But whispers crept to my ears none the less, and the mirror was often held to my eyes in odd nooks and corners.

When my brother, Lord Devenac, was set upon by poachers and half murdered in his own woods at Devon, quite half of London discerned my hand in the affair, and I am bound to confess my brother shared in this opinion.

When Florence d'Apice so theatrically quaffed that infernal mixture of champagne and prussic acid at Lady Gravesend's ball, there did not lack detractors who scandalised me as the cause of her disaster, because, forsooth, she had singled me out to be the object of her barbaric and most unwelcome devotion. Then when her brother walked me out and my rapier unluckily pricked his jugular (I vow I only intended a petty flesh wound, but my foot slipped), quite half a score of idiots turned unseeing eyes in my direction, and two gentlemen of distinction paid for their discourtesy with their lives before the rest would be reasoned into charity.

It was not my fault that I was forced to live hard by the gaming-tables. Devenac had always refused to allow me a shilling from the day I reached majority, and a man must live in spite of Monsieur Talleyrand's assertion to the contrary. I vow besides that I never once cheated at cards in my life; I have certainly selected the individuals with whom I should play, but should I be discredited

because my opponents were usually unskilful? They were not obliged to dice with me; moreover, they could well afford to lose. I have always made it a rule never to play with a poor man. In the first place, the game is not worth the candle; in the second, it is impossible to remain pleased with oneself should one win; and lastly, I have often noticed that if a man be poor enough, that fickle jade Fortune is very apt to smile in his direction. This par-parenthèse, but it might be inferred that a world so misinformed as to believe me capable of fratricide, and worse, would not hesitate to brand me as a card-sharp. Why in the name of Judas my contemporaries should have so combined to blacken my character I don't in the least know. I was not unpersonable, my manners were engaging, my conversation elegant (I avoided foul language on principle), and I dressed as well as Prince George himself, in spite of my lack of fixed income. It is even more wonderful that any door in London remained open to me in consideration of the estimation wherein I was held. I can only explain, modestly as may be, that many ladies refused to believe me anything but a maligned innocent. God bless their kind hearts! They at anyrate did not err as much as the rest, though that they erred I must confess. Lady Julia Gordon was my patron through all, chiefly, I believe, because she never heard me utter an oath under any circumstances, and she had never seen me drunk, habits

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which I believe were regarded as demoniacal affectations by her husband and my other male acquaintances.

Elfrida, Duchess of Powers, received me because she did me the honour to prefer my platonic regard to the affection or esteem of all other gentlemen, even including that of the duke, a namby-pamby whipper-snapper who hated me like the devil, but was too much the coward to invite me to walk, in spite of his smouldering jealousy. Lady Betty Primrose invariably welcomed my approach because it amused her to set her friends by the ears, and by this means she achieved her ambition without effort. She, however, took good care that her daughters should not be subjected to my evil influence. The Duchess of B- occasionally invited me to her routs in order to annoy my brother Devenac, who had offended her. Several other great ladies regarded me kindly, and opened their doors to my advance for purely private reasons, which concern no one but their impressionable selves and me. These memoirs, I might remark, are by no means confessions.

It might be asked why should I trouble to visit at houses where my presence was not welcome to all? My answer to such a question would be double-barrelled. My equivocal position afforded me a peculiar species of cynical amusement; and besides, the house of every leader of society at that time in

London possessed its card-room, wherein gambling for high stakes was carried on from dusk to dawn. Sometimes my next day's dinner depended upon the hazard of the game.

After all I enjoyed myself in a fashion. I had the satisfaction of knowing that men wilted before my frown, and paid for their backyard sneers by exaggerated courtesy to my face. True it is that with a pistol ball I could break a wine glass in the stem at fifteen paces, and the memory of Captain Humphrey's fate deterred many from engaging me who fancied their own skill at fence. And yet there were times when I was wretched—times when only an intimate knowledge of the delight wherewith the great majority would acclaim my act prevented me from lodging a bullet in my brain. I lived on in order to spite a world which had utterly failed to appreciate me.

It was thus with me on the dawn of my forty-third birthday. I awoke with a racking headache and the knowledge that I owed Lord Francis Eveston the sum of six hundred pounds, lost to him at *leartl* the previous night. By the light of a penny dip I ransacked my possessions and discovered, after a laborious search, the sum of three shillings and sevenpence. I had quitted the cardroom airily enough, and I am bound to say promised Lord Francis to pay him the money by noon next day. And now the morrow had arrived. My posi-

tion was desperate enough. I had not a ha'porth of credit in all London, and by no means that I could discover did it appear possible to transform three shillings and sevenpence into six hundred pounds. And the money had to be found. I had never had such a stroke of bad luck. Eveston was such a fool, too, he scarcely knew one card from another. The devil had surely given him his brilliant hands. I heartily cursed cards, luck, Eveston and myself, then kicked my lackey in the ribs until he awoke. 'It isn't daylight, my lord,' he grumbled sleepily.

I administered another kick, which reduced him to servility. 'Load one of my silver-handled pistols at once,' I commanded.

Richards evidently scented a meeting. He bustled about with sudden brightness, and in a few minutes had everything prepared. 'Who is it this time, my lord?' he queried curiously.

'Myself,' I answered grimly.

Richards appeared surprised. 'Eh! what, my lord?' he stammered.

- 'I am about to shoot myself,' I observed, taking up the pistol as I spoke.
- 'Your lordship is pleased to amuse himself with me,' said Richards, with pained dignity.

I smiled. 'No, my man, my time has come at last. I don't mind telling you, Richards, I owe Lord Francis Eveston six hundred pounds. I have promised to pay him by noon to-day. To meet his

claim I have exactly three shillings and sevenpence. Under the circumstances, what is left for me to do?'

Richards shuddered, and watched me out of the corners of his eyes. 'I would bolt to furrun parts, my lord,' he suggested nervously.

- 'How much do I owe you, Richards?' I asked, contemptuously regarding this advice.
 - 'Fifteen pounds, my lord.'
- 'You may have my pistols for the debt afterwards; they will sell for that.'

Richards commenced to blub. 'D-don't kill yourself, my 1-lord,' he entreated. 'What would Her Grace say?'

- 'Damn Her Grace!' I commented.
- 'What would Lady Betty say?'
- 'Damn Lady Betty!'
- 'What will I do without you?' Here the poor fellow fairly sobbed aloud. He was country bred—Richards—and I had never succeeded in kicking the heart out of him. I confess his tears touched me; they evidenced genuine affection, for by no stretch of imagination could I consider myself a good master to the lad.
- 'You fool,' I said roughly, 'you will get along a great deal better without me.' I considered here the advisability of giving the boy some good advice. 'See here, Richards,' I went on presently, 'a word with you. You are growing in years now (he was two years my junior) and after my death you will be

thrown upon the world. You have always appeared to be a fool, but you have one virtue—obedience. am giving you final orders, look to it you obey them. Never have anything to do with women, especially with married women; they play the devil with a man. If you feel yourself too utterly weak to follow my advice, marry some big, fat wench strong enough to keep you in order; it's better to be married than damned, as the Bible teaches us. Secondly, never dice nor play cards. That's a habit that generally leads to either gaol or destruction. Thirdly, cheat each master you have according to your opportunities. In that case you will rarely be short in your wages, whatever happens.' I felt quite a glow of satisfaction steal over me in delivering such virtuous counsel. Truly virtue is its own reward. I had never been quite so disinterested before. 'Now. Richards,' I pursued, 'you had better retire to the next room. I presume you would not care to watch my dissolution.'

Richards raised a tear-wet face to my inspection.

- 'Don't do it yet, for Gawd's sake, sir!' he gasped.
- 'Why not, Richards?'

'There's no occasion,' pleaded the lad. 'You needn't, you know, not before noon—you said noon,' he cried. 'Let me get you some breakfast—I've got some bones—for Gawd's sake, sir!'

I reflected. True, there was no occasion for absolute hurry, and then—bones! Richards was

a master at grilling bones. In fact, his skill in this direction amounted to positive genius. I discovered that I was hungry.

'Very well, Richards,' I assented with affected reluctance, 'get breakfast; meanwhile, I shall sleep. Call me at ten.'

I am proud to be able to truthfully record that the moment I laid head on pillow I slept profoundly. So much did the fear of certain death distract my nerves. I was awakened by the tramp of feet in my apartment.

'Richards with the bones,' I thought, and sleepily glanced at the timepiece. It was just ten.

'So you contemplate suicide,' suddenly observed a calm, deep voice that filled the room with a rich, throbbing music. I started up amazed. Two paces off there stood regarding me a tall, elegantly-attired gentleman whom I had never seen before. He was singularly handsome, having magnificent brown eyes, which, however, were cold and cynical, and was clean shaved, save for a pair of sweeping black moustaches. From his fob dangled a small ivory skull perfectly carved, and it was the more noticeable because his dress was, save for that one spot of colour, entirely sombre.

'May I inquire your name and the reason of your intrusion?' I asked politely, for I was very angry, and when I am angry I am invariably most courteous.

'My name is Messidor—Carne Messidor; I intrude'

(he shrugged his shoulders) 'because your servant stopped me in the street and begged me to accompany him here to prevent the committal of a foolish deed.'

'I beg your pardon,' I retorted sweetly, 'I have never contemplated a deed of greater wisdom; but permit me to make excuses, you have me at a disadvantage.'

'On the contrary, at advantage,' corrected my visitor, pointing gravely at my bare arms. (I was almost nude.) 'Your hair, unpowdered, is of a very handsome colour, your face is in unison, perhaps too beautiful, too finely chiselled, for a man, but the chin redeems it from effeminacy. And then that chest! those arms! My dear sir, you are a veritable Hercules.'

I blushed—I confess it, I blushed with pleasure.

'I am delighted to make your acquaintance,' I cried. 'I feel grieved that circumstances forbid me a substantial use of it.'

My visitor shrugged his shoulders with a foreign gesture, which, more than anything about him, was exasperating.

'Then your servant was not lying?' he inquired.

'If he told you that at noon I intend to shoot myself,' I responded lightly, 'he confined himself to a statement of fact.'

'Ah, but why? Surely a debt of so paltry an amount as six hundred pounds—you appear a gentleman of distinction—surely your friends—'

'I am Lord Caryl Franks,' I answered drily. 'That information should also acquaint you with the reason that I have not a friend in the world.'

Messidor bowed low. 'I am deeply pleased to have the honour of meeting you, Lord Caryl, while inexpressibly grieved to find you in such a circumstance. I am again much pleased that it is within my power to relieve your difficulty, and yet again grieved and desolate that I unhappily cannot help you without previously exacting a condition.'

His words gave me a sudden hope, for I must confess the prospect of blowing out my brains by way of post-prandial exercise did not please me.

'You are very kind,' I murmured, 'and this condition?'

Mr Messidor appeared to reflect, and during his meditation he eyed me with a glance that seemed to search and pry into the very bottom of my heart. At last he took from his pocket a small sheet of parchment, which he unfolded and placed before me.

'Read that,' he commanded.

I read and found the document to be a printed oath of allegiance to His Majesty Napoleon, Emperor of France. I glanced up and met the eyes of Messidor fixed inquiringly upon me. 'Well?' he said.

'Well?' said I.

'I require you to subscribe your name to that document,' said monsieur, whom I now decided must certainly be a Frenchman.

- 'And doubtless take the oath therein prescribed,' I suggested.
 - 'Undoubtedly.'
 - 'In which case?'
- 'In which case,' said Messidor, 'I shall have much pleasure in advancing you the sum of a thousand pounds.'

The bait was tempting, but I did not hesitate.

- 'I refuse,' I said.
- 'Come, come,' said monsieur, 'a thousand pounds would be very useful to you just now.'
 - 'I do not deny it, but you ask too much in return.'
- 'You mean that I do not offer enough. Let us say two thousand pounds.'
 - 'I cannot be bought, monsieur.'

Messidor again shrugged his shoulders. 'Let me confess you are not unknown to me; your name was mentioned to me before my arrival here, and your antecedents. I know that in men's mouths your name is odious, but in the case of the other sex the reverse obtains, and pardon me, milord, having seen you I cannot wonder at that; the wonder would exist if it were otherwise. With you I have been given discretionary powers. Join me, my lord, and your fortune is assured; my Emperor will take your future into his special care. Within a month he will land in England with a vast and unconquerable army; pouf! the month after that and your England will be a province of France, as it was seven centuries



A Windfall

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ago. Nothing can avert the march of the man of destiny, nothing can alter his intention; already a vast army stands awaiting his orders to embark; already a great fleet is prepared to bring his troops across; already I have approached a number of your peers, who are waiting with anxious hearts to greet the great Emperor. This oath of allegiance I now ask you to sign has been subscribed by members of your own Government, by members of your Church and State. I offer you the chance of a lifetime—it were madness on your part to refuse. I will, however, be entirely frank with you. You can do the great cause a more intimate service than other men, and for that reason I am empowered to offer you the greatest advantages. You shall be created a duke, with estates both in France and England, and in the meantime a pension will be granted you of a thousand pounds a month. In exchange you will be merely required to use your influence with the members of the gentle sex, the belles dames of your acquaintance, to inspire in their hearts an admiration, even a tolerance of the great Napoleon. Emperor, the master of all the most subtle secrets of the universe, knows that the world is governed less by the mind of man than by the heart of woman, and he is prepared to richly reward those who by the kindness of Providence are in a position to assist his cause in this direction. More especially I am desirous you should gain to our side the Duchess of Powers, for the will of her husband is her will, and his widespread political influence once cast in our favour will henceforth determine much. He has been approached by my agents and is at present wavering. I depend upon you to complete his conversion—by the method I have indicated. You perceive I conceal nothing from you. And now, milord, your answer?

I listened to this amazing speech with the profoundest interest, unable to move or protest, so much overcome was I with surprise at the information disclosed and the astounding insolence of the concluding proposition.

'According to you,' I gasped at last, 'there is a widespread conspiracy on foot to betray England to your Emperor.'

'I would not use the word "betray,"' murmured Messidor; 'each of your countrymen who has joined us is in the truest sense a patriot, in that each desires ardently the best good for his country, and is convinced that such will only arrive under the glorious auspices of the great Emperor.'

'Words! words!' I cried hoarsely; 'they are damned traitors every one!'

Messidor started back abruptly. 'What!' he cried. 'Nom de diable, you—you—'

I sprang to the floor and faced him. 'Who are the men who have joined you?' I demanded.

He frowned darkly and put his hand beneath his cloak. 'Your answer first,' he growled.

'There is my answer,' I cried, and dashed my fist in his face.

He fell to the floor, but even as he fell a bullet grazed my temple and I staggered back half stunned. In a second he was up and at my throat, but I grappled with him, and in the nick of time caught his right hand, which held an ugly-looking knife.

The door burst open, and Richards, trembling and white-faced, entered. Seeing the encounter the fool evidently imagined Messidor was attempting to prevent me from committing suicide, for instead of coming to my assistance he rushed to help the Frenchman, and actually tried to pinion my arms. However, Messidor did not know that, but thinking the reinforcement might be on my side, he wriggled like an eel from my grasp and fled to the door. With monstrous effort I threw myself upon him, swinging Richards off his feet, but the fool encumbered me with his weight, I fell short, and all I grasped was the skull which dangled from the Frenchman's fob. The door slammed in my face, and I sank down beside it, covered with blood and half fainting.

'Good Gawd! good Gawd!' howled Richards. 'Say you are not dead, my lord, say you are not dead.'

'I'll show whether I am dead or not, you idiot!' I growled, for the fool's emotion aroused me. I staggered to my feet, determined to inflict sound and memorable punishment, but as I raised my hand

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I saw for the first time the skull which I still clutched by the riband. At the other end of the riband swung a small case of green leather stamped back and front with a solitary golden bee. I paused, hesitated, investigated.

Within this case, which chanced to be a purse reposed English Treasury notes to the value of ten thousand pounds. Instead of beating Richards—and well the fool deserved exemplary castigation—I was magnanimous enough under the circumstances to embrace him.



CHAPTER II

THE SHIRT OF MAIL

AFTER the first sharp exuberance of my delight at the unexpected turn of fortune's wheel had passed, I questioned Richards closely and ascertained that the rascal, after assuring himself that I was actually asleep, had hidden my pistols and then crept out into the streets. He had hurried to the houses of most of my lady friends to implore their assistance in preserving my life, but the early hour had defeated his affectionate intentions. In every case he had been denied admission, and, finally driven desperate he had accosted half a score of strangers in the streets. These must have taken him for a drunken maniac, for they generally refused to hearken to his appeal, all save Messidor, who immediately, on hearing my name, heartily agreed to my lackey's proposition and made his way at top speed to my rooms. Beyond this Richards knew nothing of the man, and the encounter and subsequent adventure were the outcome of purest chance. It was a golden chance for me, however, and I found it hard to credit. that so great a sum was actually in my possession.

I breakfasted that morning with as light a heart as any man in the kingdom; then having sent Richards on a message, I concealed the bulk of the notes in a hiding-place so cunningly contrived that I would have defied Vidocq himself to discover it.

At noon, precisely, I waited upon Lord Francis Eveston at his rooms in Oxford Street. A dozen gentlemen were lounging there sipping a new liquor called whisky, which was already achieving popularity by reason of its capacity for producing intoxication by express. A beastly draught, I call it, and unfitted to placate a refined palate, exuding as it does, moreover, a noxious odour of stale breath.

Lord Francis, who was fencing behind a mask with Egerton Bailey of the 10th Hussars, called to me over his shoulder as I entered,—

'I have been waiting for you, Franks; pour yourself out a glass of whisky.'

Now it seemed to me that I was punctual enough considering the hour had not commenced to chime.

'No, I thank you,' I murmured, 'but please inform me the reason of your expectation. It is not yet the hour; did you permit yourself to suppose that I would fail you?' My words and my frown brought the fencing to an abrupt conclusion.

'By no means, my dear fellow,' cried Eveston, with absurd haste. 'Damn the money! The fact is I have news for you.'

I raised my eyebrows, shrugged my shoulders, and

drew from my pocket six hundred pounds. 'I presume you have no objection to be paid in Government notes,' I suggested. But I was utterly unprepared for the sensation my action caused.

The whole party clustered round me and stared at the notes as if they were the only documents of that nature in the world.

'Good heavens!' cried Bailey, trembling with excitement. 'Just as he said.'

'Good God!' gasped Eveston.

'What do you mean, sir?' I demanded sternly. 'Are you not satisfied? Here is your money.'

But Eveston fell back and refused to touch the notes, and the crowd gaped at me as though I had been suddenly transformed into a monster.

A thousand thoughts and suspicions flitted through my brain. A nameless fear assailed my heart. I felt I was trembling on the brink of a precipice, but I had been too long a gambler to allow a trace of my emotion to appear.

'What is the meaning of this insult?' I demanded, my hand on my sword, and shooting a glance at each in turn.

My gesture was unmistakable, and I flatter myself I can always assume an expression formidable enough to extort reason from those who know me.

Young Cavanagh, who had been eyeing me with open disdain, allowed his glance to fall. Somerset

turned pale. Carew tugged at his moustache. Bailey nudged Eveston with his elbow. 'Better tell him,' he whispered. Young Belmont swung on his heel, while of all present only Eveston returned my glance, assuming that severely judicial air for which he afterwards became noted on the Bench.

'A serious charge has been preferred against you, Lord Caryl,' he answered, 'and your offer to me of these Treasury notes imparts a certain amount of circumstantial evidence in support.'

With a flash of inspiration the whole matter became plain to me.

'First the charge!' I demanded, assuming my most insolent demeanour.

But Eveston fumbled with his hands and appeared anything but comfortable. 'Be assured first, Lord Caryl, that I in no way assumed the charge to be true. When you entered I was about to mention the matter as a jest. It was only when you offered me Treasury notes that the affair looked serious.'

I stamped my foot. 'The charge first; afterwards your excuses—and satisfying excuses too, Lord Francis!'

'If they are needed,' he returned coldly. 'A gentleman, introduced here by no less a person than the Prince, informed us that he had early this morning been lured to your rooms and violently robbed by you of no less a sum than ten thousand pounds in Treasury bills. He further stated that you would visit me at noon and pay your last night's losses by means of a portion of those very bills.'

I smiled derisively. 'A very pretty story,' I commented; 'and this gentleman's name?'

'Here is his card—Jean Jacques Carondel, Marquis de Sevringen.'

'Then,' said I very coolly, 'Jean Jacques Carondel, Marquis de Sevringen, whom I presume is a Frenchman and a Royalist, among his other great accomplishments—for I have not the honour of the gentleman's acquaintance, and I can only judge of the rest by the evidence before me—is an expert—a remarkably expert, circumstantial and most rascally liar.'

A long sigh as of pent-up excitement suddenly given rein greeted my words, and with the speed of thought the gentlemen about me parted into a double line, leaving me standing between the rows. It was done with miraculous cleverness, like a stage play. I turned to inquire the reason and beheld facing me, the width of the room between us, His Royal Highness Prince George, leaning upon the arm of my morning visitor, Carne Messidor.

Experiences such as this, and the manner in which I was able to carry myself through them, have reconciled me more than aught else to remember with philosophic resignation my long, and I fear not altogether reputable, attachment to the card-table. The professional gambler, his apprenticeship once

served, is par excellence captain of his features. I declare that I fronted my new trial with visage calmly imperturbable. If possible I was too indifferent. My lips parted in a pleasant smile. I bowed profoundly to the Prince. 'How does your Royal Highness this morning?' I queried in a voice that contained no suspicion of tremulousness.

The Prince eyed me gravely, and barely nodded to my salute, then he turned to the Frenchman.

- 'Is this the man, marquis?' he asked.
- 'Yes, your Highness,' answered Messidor, or, as I suppose I should call him, the Marquis de Sevringen.
- 'I understand, sir,' said the Prince to me in his severest tones, 'that you deny all acquaintance with my friend here.'
- 'Pardon, your Highness, only with the Marquis de Sevringen; Monsieur Carne Messidor I know to my cost.'
 - 'Carne Messidor!' repeated the Prince, puzzled.
- 'Your Highness's friend' (I laid a nasty emphasis on the word) 'evidently possesses several names. Your Highness has listened to a grave charge made against me by this Frenchman—'
- 'Your Highness,' interrupted the marquis, very rudely to my thinking, 'is it necessary to bandy words with this robber? Is it not rather a matter for your courts of law? I make the charge that this man has stolen from my person ten thousand pounds.

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From behind that curtain I perceived him offer to Milord Eveston some of the very notes which he this morning abstracted from my pocket; no doubt the remainder are still at his rooms. I implore your Highness's assistance to save my property. Should not this man be placed in custody?'

'Can you swear to the notes?' asked the Prince, with some hesitation.

'Undoubtedly.'

The matter commenced to wear for me a very black appearance, and this I was not slow to realise. Of course I knew this French marquis to be an agent of Napoleon and no Bourbon at all. But he evidently had acquired the friendship of the Prince by some devilish means, and he had been clever enough to discount any charge I might prefer against him by striking first and accusing me of robbery. I commenced to actually admire the man, but, as will no doubt be surmised, my admiration was largely mixed with other emotions. It was not long before I had resolved upon my course, and the gambler's spirit within me loudly acclaimed the determination to risk all on a single shuffle of the cards.

Slowly drawing the notes from my pocket I made a low bow to the Prince. 'This Frenchman, your Royal Highness,' I observed with a fine assumption of scorn, 'declares that I have robbed him and states that he can identify the notes. Now this

bundle of notes represents my worldly wealth, your Highness will discover, exactly nine hundred pounds.' Here I handed the bundle to the Prince, who received them in astonishment. I proceeded with another low reverence: 'As an Englishman, your Royal Highness, and a loyal subject, I place myself unreservedly in your hands. If the Frenchman will identify those notes by the only certain means possible, and correctly state their numbers, their numbers' (I repeated), 'to your Royal Highness, then —' I spread out my hands and shrugged my shoulders.

The marquis perceptibly changed colour. 'I am not a banker to keep the numbers of notes, but' (he snapped this out viciously) 'my notes are all marked on the back with a blue cross.'

I was equal to this emergency. 'The way your Royal Highness is holding the notes allows this fact to be readily perceived,' I observed with a gesture of contempt. 'I always mark my notes for luck.'

This was a common enough practice among gamblers, and I could see that the Prince, and in fact the whole audience, were wavering between us. I instantly made a hazard, the risk to me of which was infinitely more deadly than my other lucky shot, but I saw one chance, for it was reasonable to suppose that this rascal who had tried to bribe me to betray my country must have originally been supplied with French gold, and mayhap recently, in

which case he would not dare to carry the matter further.

'There is a simple way of settling this dispute, your Royal Highness,' I remarked with splendid nonchalance. 'Your friend' (with a sneer) 'doubtless obtained his notes, if he ever possessed any, from some person or other, or from a bank. In either case the numbers must be easily obtainable.'

'Good!' cried the Prince, much relieved. 'What say you, marquis?'

But the Frenchman was biting his lips with rage.

'Ah!' he hissed, 'long before I can obtain the numbers the rest of my money will be gone.'

'Will your Royal Highness deign to accompany me to my poor rooms and allow this mad Frenchman to search for himself?' I asked politely.

'Sang de Dicu,' grated out the marquis; 'then you have disposed of your stolen goods already?'

It was exactly what I required, this speech.

I stepped back two paces to deliver the climax.

'Your Royal Highness and gentlemen,' I cried in a clear, ringing voice, 'I call you to witness how long I have submitted, in deference to your Royal Highness's presence, to this man's infernal insults.

'He has come forward and gratuitously made a diabolical charge against me. Shielded by the protection of my Prince, this man, a Frenchman, and in my humble opinion a dastardly traitor to God and man, has dared to traduce an Englishman's dearest

honour; I have defied him to prove his words; he has answered with fresh abuse. Your Royal Highness, I crave your pardon, but I am, after all, only flesh and blood; there is a limit to my self-control, and that boundary has been passed.' With a swift movement I advanced and deliberately spat in the Frenchman's face.

It appeared to me that for the moment I had actually-I, that devil Franks!-achieved a certain popularity. No doubt it was largely due to my artful accentuation of the opposing nationalities, but nevertheless a distinct hum of approval greeted my action. Lord Francis Eveston went so far as to clap his Even the Prince gave vent to a goodhumoured oath. It was the first time in my life that I had been universally acclaimed. And now a word in apology for my brutality. It seemed to me absolutely necessary that I must kill this Frenchman. In the first place, it was a duty I felt that I owed my country to clip his capacity for working public ill. In the second, his money was undoubtedly in my possession, and only after his death could I feel perfectly at ease in spending it, for he was evidently a creature of infinite resource and daring, and he had reason enough to work hard for my downfall. I merely slapped his face he might have refused to fight me and his refusal have been upheld by the others while my innocence or guilt remained in doubt. It therefore became needful to adopt a

course sufficiently provoking to force even a pig to fight.

I am bound to confess the Frenchman bore himself gallantly enough; he wiped his face with a dainty lace mouchoir, which he presently threw, with magnificent disdain, into the blazing fire. His cheeks had grown a queer fish-white colour, like to the pallor of a three days' corpse, but, by Saint John, his eyes were hotter and fiercer than live coals. He fronted the Prince with horrible composure and forced out words between clenched teeth by sheer physical effort.

'Your Highness,' he muttered in a whisper so low that none but my ears heard, 'has been good enough to accept certain gifts from me.' I pricked up my ears at this and recognised the cause of the Prince's complaisance to the marquis. 'I beg one favour in return.'

'Name it,' muttered the Prince.

'That your Royal Highness will condescend to witness a fencing match which I have the honour to propose should take place immediately between myself and this'—(his face went suddenly purple) 'this gentleman.'

The Prince turned red with vexation, and perhaps alarm.

I went to his assistance. 'You see, your Highness,' I cried gaily, 'we each fancy our own style of sword-manship, and the only method open to find the master is a match, with buttons on the foils, of course.'

'Of course,' grated the marquis.

Everybody acclaimed this proposal, and the Prince, though much against his will, presently agreed, only strenuously insisting that the buttons should be firmly placed.

In two minutes we were ready and the swords crossed. Then a strange thing happened! The marquis's foot tripped and he fell to the ground. As if such accidents were infectious I followed suit, and when we arose each of our blades had glittering points.

'The buttons are off! Stop!' cried the Prince, angrily.

I stared at my blade, the marquis stared at his.

'Your Royal Highness is surely mistaken,' I ventured humbly.

'Surely,' echoed the marquis.

The Prince appealed to the others. 'The foils are bare!' he cried.

One and all assured him of his mistake, and presently, with a soul-comforting curse, he sank back in his chair and shaded his eyes with his hand. 'The devil take you all!' he growled.

For the first time in my life I paraded before a sympathetic audience. Though no word in my favour had been spoken I felt it in my bones, and I knew that every man there ardently desired me to beat the Frenchman. The feeling gave me additional strength, confidence and composure. Hitherto I had invariably fought in the presence of those who would have welcomed my defeat with thankful hearts, and

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the knowledge of that disposition had ever nerved me to a recklessness irreconcilable with a display of perfect skill. But now I was at my best. I determined to kill my opponent, and with all the assurance of destiny I marked the spot on his shirt front where my blade should enter to search his heart. The marquis was a fine exponent of one style of fence and one style only—that of the Italian school. In that I admit he was near perfect. But I had mastered all schools and styles, and very soon he perceived that his life was at my mercy.

I paid him many compliments as we proceeded. but he never relaxed from a fixed, dog-like grin. His blade once slipped past my head, only a swerve saved me. I pierced the lobe of his left ear by way of return. His blade passed between my left arm and my body; in exchange I cut his lower lip in two. One thing, however, I could not fail to notice in his He left his breast entirely unprotected. Suspecting a ruse I feinted in such a manner as to lead him to expect a fatal thrust. He actually courted the disaster, for throwing up his sword he made no counter thrust. I was confounded with surprise, for no tyro could have been so foolish. reasoned as I played with him, and presently hazarded a guess. To make sure I forced a smart rally, and in the midst of it pricked at his heart. My blade grated on steel armour, and without doubt, had I thrust hard enough I should have been left with a broken and useless sword. Thereafter he fought like a fiend incarnate, and only my skill and activity saved me from several vicious thrusts, but at last, with a swift lunge and turn of wrist, I sent his blade spinning from his grasp and he stood at my mercy, my point at his throat, his life mine to take or give.

His face, pallid before, was livid as a ghost, but I marked another emotion in him now. Fear—craven fear! He could not speak for fear, and his teeth rattled like castanets. I gently pricked his throat; he fell back step by step, I following him, until brought up by the wall he was constrained to pause. The silence in that room was the silence of a charnel house—intense, ghastly, full of horrid mystery. I was the god in the machine. I broke the silence.

'Undress, monsieur,' I commanded.

He actually snivelled.

'Undress, monsieur,' I icily repeated, 'or die.'

As I said these words a gleam of craven hope crept into his bloodshot eyes. His teeth still chattering, he drew off his shirt, and there, manifest to all, the coward stood revealed, for from neck to brisket he wore an undershirt of chain steel impenetrable by sword or dagger.

I stood over him, believe me, magnificent in my scorn. 'This, your Royal Highness,' I said, 'is the creature who would assail the honour of an Englishman. I will not defame by his death a sword which as yet has only drunk gallant blood.'

Then with a gesture of disdain I sent my rapier rattling back into its scabbard.

The marquis caught up his clothes and hurried to the door. There he paused an instant and stared at me, hungrily, hungrily, yet gave utterance to no word. For long afterwards the memory of that glance haunted me. It was the look of a lost soul who gazes on the objective cause of its damnation. It was the glance of a demon full of venom and most poisonous ill-will. When the door closed I stared blankly at the panels, half regretting the impulse which had made me spare a life.

But a heavy hand on my shoulder aroused me to the present, and Prince George's uncouth but merry voice rang in my ear.

'For Gad! Franks, I wouldn't like to stand afore your sword, man. Well, we've done a good morning's work between us: you've bowled out a blackguard, I've paid off a long score—Gad! yes, a long score indeed. Well, what say, shall we lunch together?'

There ensued the marvellous spectacle of the First Gentleman of England walking arm-in-arm down Piccadilly with 'that devil Franks.'

Every face we met in our march went yellow with curiosity. Men stopped, stared and rubbed their eyes.

Truly, to more than me the world seemed turning topsy-turvey.

CHAPTER III

HIGH TREASON

THE main point was that I was quite a rich man. Ten thousand pounds! I doubt if Devenac himself could have placed his hand on such a sum without considerable effort. I paid for the lunch. It cost me just thirty-eight shillings, for the Prince ordered one quart of old port and then another, but every mouthful made him more good-natured and more friendly-disposed towards me so I did not regret the prospect of this expenditure. He was then engaged fighting the King and Addington to try and wring from them a position in the army at least equal to that of the Duke of York, considering it far below his royal dignity to longer remain a paltry colonel of Dragoons. I had never mixed much in politics but I was quite conversant with the ordinary affairs of the day, and the army was a sore point with me. Five times during the present campaign I had attempted to obtain a commission for active service in Spain, but my applications had been contemptuously disregarded. I had been each time referred to the fact that after that little affair at Goa at the end

of Wellesley's campaign in India (through which I had fought with honour) I had been dismissed the service in disgrace for the paltry matter of shooting Lord Melville's brother-in-law, in defiance of the edict forbidding duels. It will be readily perceived therefore, that political influence I had none, for the excuse was trifling, and Melville was then on the eve of being impeached for malversation of State funds, yet he was able to veto my ambitions. I was all the more ready on that account to sympathise with the Prince, and my comprehensive damnation of the Government against which he was striving placed us on the most amicable terms. I fancy I could have gained his influence in my favour, and was actually on the point of asking it, when an untoward accident occurred.

In the course of my life the most of both my best and worst fortune has come to me through the hands of that incomprehensible creature—woman. But I am a philosopher and have schooled myself to offset the good against the bad, so I bear but little of ill-will against the sex. However, I confess in this instance I was inclined to resent the sending of the fates, although their ministress was fair enough. The room in Bidewell's in which we sat opened upon a passage hung on each side with mirrors. Unfortunately the door stood wide, and as I was modestly about to set forth my aspirations to the Prince, I noticed his eyes wander to the doorway, and suddenly his whole de-

meanour change. His nostrils quivered with excitement, his lips were closed tightly over his teeth, his eyes sparkled.

Following his glance I caught a glimpse of a surpassingly handsome woman's face reflected in the mirror on the side of the passage opposite the door. She was pausing to arrange her hat or veil (a wellplaced mirror is, as I have frequently observed, an irresistible stumbling-block to the march of womankind), and with an air of fascinating coquetry she smiled with dazzling sweetness at her own reflection, or rather, as we beheld it, her reflection smiled at her. She was a trifle below the average height, perhaps, petite and dainty, with an admirable figure, admirably displayed by the rich, creamy velvet drapings that encompassed her. Her eyes were big and blue as violets; her hair a wonderful deep golden colour tinted with russet flashings; her nose, lips and chin the perfection of bewitching beauty and roguish innocence; while her skin was white as snow and smooth as satin. "Fore Gad," cried the Prince, presently, 'Pysche incarnate! How devilish well she'd look naked, Franks.'

I had sometimes heard that it was His Highness's custom to commence acquaintance with errant damsels by some such brutally open expression of admiration. The girl turned a rosy, startled face in our direction, then vanished.

But the Prince was on his feet in a second and

after her. I heard a scuffle in the passage, and in a moment he returned, dragging the lady with him, one arm around her waist, his free hand over her mouth to suppress all outcry.

His Royal Highness had drunk himself by now to a pitch of lusty recklessness, and he slammed the door behind him right noisily. 'Help! help!' cried the girl, wildly, as soon as her mouth was free. Her voice had a slightly foreign ring, but even so used, it was belllike and silvery-toned.

There is nothing in man or woman which gives me greater pleasure than a beautiful voice. I felt attracted towards this damsel at once, for hers was singularly perfect. The Prince laughed boisterously at her screams.

'Whom do you expect?' he guffawed. 'Bidewell?' and he slapped his thigh with his left hand at the joke, for Bidewell was noted as his satellite and procureur. His right arm still encircled the girl, and he now attempted to buss her.

But he had caught a Tartar; she struggled, bit and screamed, and then in a flash slipped from his grasp, and the door being blocked by his form she darted behind the table and seized a dinner-knife. I watched the affair, disgusted beyond words at the Prince's method of wooing, but it seemed none of my business. I wondered, however, at her resistance; for a woman who visited Bidewell's unprotected, she exhibited an inexplicable inclination to defend her honour,

The Prince drew back from the knife. 'Ho! a vixen,' he growled; 'come, sweetheart, no need to be coy with your Prince.'

'Princes or peasants, you are brutes! cowards!' cried the girl. 'You to insult me, you' (this to me with a glance of psssionate contempt) 'to allow a lady to be thus hatefully assaulted. Oh, you will pay for it yet; I say so, I—Clarisse d'Arras.'

I sprang to my feet amazed.

'What?' I thundered.

But the Prince, taking advantage of the girl's momentary attention to me, sprang forward and cleverly wrested the knife from her grasp.

'And now, sweetheart,' he growled, 'you'll pay me usuriously for those scurvy names.'

But the girl, though caught in his embrace, thrust herself from him, and leaning back appealed to me with a look which, should I live a thousand years, I shall not forget.

It fired every fibre of my body and sent a thousand lightnings coursing through my veins.

Next moment she was free and I bending over the Prince, who lay stunned upon the floor with the mark of a livid bruise fresh upon his forehead. It was the work of a second and regretted as soon as complete.

I stood for a while dazed, almost panic-stricken by my folly.

I, Caryl Franks, had dared to strike to earth the

son of my King, and to gratify the capricious coyness of a wanton. Before this my other escapades sank into insignificance. Half desperate, wholly wretched, I turned to the girl. She was regarding me with eyes half fearful, half admiring, and now that she felt herself safe, a trace of coquetry was also manifest.

I was not a man had I not been charmed, in spite of the terrors of fifty high treasons. She came to my side and took my hand with the prettiest air of innocence imaginable.

'Ah, monsieur,' she murmured, 'you prove to me that I have made one mistake; at least you are an honourable gentleman.'

She was certainly a Frenchwoman; she spoke so much like a lady that I hesitated, then said, 'You jested when you called yourself D'Arras, mademoiselle? Is it not so?'

- 'Why should you think my words a jest?'
- 'Your presence here,' I answered gravely. 'This house is not the place for a maid to visit unattended.'

She flushed crimson and eyed me haughtily a while, then glanced at the Prince, who still lay like a log.

'Evidently so,' she sarcastically observed; but her face quickly softened, and she murmured, 'I came hither with my maid, who has, it seems, deserted me, in search of my brother. Needless to say my business was urgent,'

'A thousand pardons, mademoiselle,' I urged. 'I am your very humble servant.'

'Indeed you have befriended me,' she cried, 'and I were an ungrateful creature not to be obliged to you. May I not know my preserver's name, so that my brother may express our thanks befittingly to you.'

'Caryl Franks, I am called, and if you will deign accept my escort to where you wish, I am at your service.'

She thanked me prettily, and we proceeded to the street, but there we found the maid awaiting her mistress, pale and terrified.

Mademoiselle rated her soundly for the cowardly desertion, then rather abruptly, it seemed to me, declined my further escort. 'I am quite safe now,' she declared, and with a charming smile tripped away. The ingratitude of women! She apparently completely disregarded the strait into which she had brought her protector.

As for me, I debated whether or not I should get out of England with all possible despatch, and so try and save my neck, or return to the Prince and throw myself upon his mercy. The bolder course seemed the best, and I made my way upstairs again, sheepishly enough, to be quite truthful. I found His Royal Highness both conscious and wrathful, seated at the table before a glass of port. He gave me a scowl as I entered. 'I hope your Royal Highness is quite recovered,' I ventured recklessly.

'Fore Gad, no thanks to you if I am,' he retorted. 'What made you leave me? and who the devil struck me that coward's blow?'

'Heavens!' thought I, 'he doesn't know 'twas me.'

I seized my chance, however, like a true soldier of fortune. I breathed hard and pretended to have just returned from violent effort of some sort. 'God knows, sir,' I gasped. 'Your Highness must forgive me for deserting you, but I tried to run the rascals down. Three men they were with masked faces, and they all but knifed you as you lay. They could run like the devil, too, and slipped me in a maze of alleys. Thank God your Highness is unhurt. I returned the instant I could, running all the way.'

He swallowed the lie without a question.

'And the wench?' he demanded.

'She vanished like a sprite, sir, where I cannot say.'

He extended to me his hand good-humouredly enough. 'Well, you've saved my life likely enough, lad,' he cried, 'you won't find me ungrateful.'

I pressed his fingers fervently. 'Would I could have done more,' I muttered, and bent my head to smother a laugh. 'Indeed,' I pursued, 'your Highness should never permit yourself to be without a guard. Luckily in this instance my blade was a match for three knives, but I say without boasting few men are my equals with the sword;' and I



concluded, with the unction of a courtier, 'you should remember that your Highness's life is the hope of England.'

''Fore Gad,' answered George, 'I commence to think you are right. I've had, thanks to you, a narrow escape. But whom think you those rascals were?'

I bent forward and whispered mysteriously, 'Napoleonic agents, I make no doubt. They spoke no word, but one who felt my point let drop a French oath and in the voice of a gentleman.'

The Prince turned quite pale and rose unsteadily to his feet. 'Let us get out of this, Franks,' he muttered, 'I feel shaken; and, lad, if you love me, keep your sword loose. You've a pretty hand with the sword. Franks.'

I had, it seems, succeeded in putting the fear of God into the Prince's heart, but then all the Georges were cravens. It suited my book, however, to keep him on tenter-hooks, and I filled the way to the street with dark hints of royal assassinations, plots and all manner of bloody conspiracies afoot. And also I sang my own praises without stint, until presently, meeting a half score of his cronies, I left him, thinking me the bravest, the cleverest and the most loyally unscrupulous swashbuckler in England. I bore with me his earnest request to join him in a rout that very evening, and he muttered in my ear as we parted,—

'Don't fail me, lad; I won't feel safe without you're by me.'

On the road to my lodgings I chuckled frequently, except when I thought on Mademoiselle d'Arras. Against her I could not avoid nourishing a certain resentment. She had treated me curtly and shabbily, I thought, and I was not used at that time to aught but pestering attentions at the hands of women. I had, however, still much to learn on many subjects, and this I realised no later than when I turned the lock and passed through the door of my chamber.

CHAPTER IV

I LOSE A VALUABLE SWORD

IT was a club, I suppose, that felled me, and when I woke to consciousness sunset was near at hand. It is ever a fool's mistake to underrate even the meanest enemy, and I now bitterly discounted the vainglorious impulse which had induced me to spare the life of the Marquis de Sevringen.

One hasty glance gave me the condition of affairs. My lacquey, poor beggar, lay like a trussed fowl near by me, gagged firmly with a bloody kerchief.

The whole apartment was ransacked and horribly shipwrecked. The drawer of my cabinet and its contents dashed in one corner. My desk smashed to fragments, my bed hewn in pieces. The carpet up, torn and bundled in a heap, the very chairs unscrewed and their parts scattered broadcast. The marquis stood gloating like the pirate he was above the ruin he had caused, while two men, his creatures, were busily engaged in tearing up the floor at his direction. I could have wept with rage, for I had taken a pride in furnishing that room, and much gold and self-denial had its elegant fittings cost me. I found that my

hands were bound behind my back, but I was not gagged, and with some trouble I raised myself to my elbow.

'Well,' I cried passionately, 'devil take me, but at anyrate you are earning a reputation for thoroughness.'

The marquis stepped forward and kicked me in the mouth.

'Hold your tongue,' he commanded.

Thank God his foot was lightly shod, but I tasted blood all the same, and his kick sent me half stunned to the floor again. I think this was the first occasion I had ever understood the proper meaning of the verb 'to hate.' 'Hate,' as a substantive, I had experienced before, but in an abstract fashion, and easily subject to control; entirely apart, indeed, from the active fury which possessed me now.

I lay still and worked silently at my bonds. I do not know if I have previously stated that physically I am a strong man. But such is the fact. An ordinary iron poker I can bend across my knee without pain; pennies I can break between my fingers; a pack of cards I can to this day tear in halves as easily as a child may tear a single sheet of paper; and at that time I was in the prime of manhood, in the acme of strength and vigour.

In the course of five minutes I had succeeded in loosening the cords that bound me, sufficiently, at all events, to afford a *point d'appui*, and I knew that when

the time came I could burst them asunder with one great effort. Meanwhile the search went on, and from the heavy breathing of the marquis and his running fire of muttered curses I could judge how anxious he was that his quest should be rewarded. This set me thinking. To an important agent of the great Napoleon it seemed unlikely that even so large a sum as ten thousand pounds should be of so much moment, considering, too, how liberally the Emperor was reported to be in the habit of supplying his trusted By any chance could that purse have conservants. tained a second compartment? Could the skull possess some mystery of its own? I had been so delighted with my windfall that I had but cursorily glanced at either before consigning them to concealment. I reflected also that a man so cowardly as I had proved De Sevringen to be would not have adopted that morning's daring course without strong urging. For a further half hour the three scoundrels continued their work, watched all the while by me with unconcealed amusement. Twenty times they were on the verge of making the discovery they so ardently desired, and twenty times they paused upon the threshold.

I might remark that my hiding-place was secure more by reason of its simplicity than aught else. It was too simple to suspect anyone but a fool of choosing as a bank. It consisted of nothing but an ornamental iron rubbish box into which I usually

had a double bottom, and the idiots never gave such a possibility a thought. I judged the marquis was at the end of his resources when he came to me at last. Such proved to be the case. 'If you value your life,' he muttered savagely, 'you will assist us, milord.'

- I laughed in his face. 'Have the goodness to free my hands then, marquis.'
 - 'Do I look such a fool?' he snarled.
- 'Thanks,' I cried gaily, 'but the compliment to me dishonours yourself. What, three to one and still afraid?'

He went white to the lips and drew his dagger, and at a word his followers were on me. One knelt on my chest, the other sat astride my legs. Even Hercules would have refused the struggle. I lay still.

"Hear me,' said De Sevringen. 'Return me the purse and skull. I will give you the money and your life.'

But I was foolish enough to lose my temper.

'Find them yourself, you pig of a coward,' I snarled.

The marquis knelt on my stomach and slit open my doublet with his knife. I struggled like a lion, but in vain. Remember, I was lying on my back with the weight of three big men and my own upon my bound arms!

The marquis bared my chest and deliberately

commenced to slice at my skin with his dagger point.

'I am carving my name at present,' he announced coldly. 'If that does not suffice I shall cut out your ribs one by one.'

The torture, however, was sufficiently keen. 'Enough!' I gasped.

Sevringen desisted immediately. 'Speak!' he commanded.

But I continued to pant and blow, and made so good a show of it that he ordered his men to arise, and got to his feet himself.

'Water!' I gasped. One of the ruffians fetched me a glass and raised my head. I pretended to be utterly undone and spilt more than half, but I had effected my purpose, and I knew where rested my sword when I fell back; but the marquis got impatient and gave me a brutal kick in the ribs. 'Enough of this,' he snarled; 'point out your hiding-place.'

I nodded with an affectation of parlous weakness to the wall opposite, twenty feet away. 'Button, third—p—panel—corner,' I muttered and pretended to swoon.

From almost closed eyes I watched two of the rascals speed off to tap the panels indicated, but the marquis was cleverer than I thought, and he remained by me with naked dagger. But his men were slow and himself impatient. 'One of you come here,' he cried, 'and let me look.'

But he did not wait, striding off as he spoke.

I seized the opportunity and put forth every ounce of force I possessed. The cords parted with a crackling rend. Quick as thought I flung myself upon my sword and dragged myself to a stand by the aid of a broken table, cutting the bonds of my feet as I rose. Even then I was scarcely in time, and the marquis's dagger scored my left arm from wrist to elbow as he darted at me. I sent him back with a right-hand blow, smashing his face with my sword hilt, and then engaged the points of the other two, who now confronted me. Another second and it was three, for De Sevringen discarded his dagger and drew his rapier.

'Twas then I needed every particle of my great strength, every tittle of my skill of fence gained in parading various gentlemen on a hundred diverse greenswards. But it is a different matter to fence with three skilled swordsmen than with one; besides, my limbs were cramped and my head dizzy.

The shape of the room alone saved me—that, and the rascals' own reckless waste of my good furniture.

I sprang over a pile of wrecked goods and confronted them from a long alcove which usually served for Richard's mattress, now a tangled mass of straw and horsehair strewn at the other end of the apartment.

They came at me like bloodhounds, but one

tripped over an upturned chair, and I spitted him with the best heart in the world.

I came very near forgetting the marquis's armour once, thrusting full at his chest, but luckily he stepped aside, floundering over the wreckage, and I sent my point through both his cheeks, damaging his molars in the passage too, I fancy.

The third man gave me some trouble for a while, but finally I got under his guard and drove my rapier hilt-deep in his heart.

Sevringen did not, however, wait for me to finish him; his retreat was open, and, like a good general, observing himself overmatched he took to his heels with a grace and readiness I could not sufficiently admire. I was far too weary to follow him, and, besides, the cut on my arm was bleeding freely. This, however, Richards soon put to rights, binding it up with a balsam which his old mother had given him as a cure for all fleshly ills, and which I imagine overjoyed the rascal to find of use.

Then ensued the question what to do with the bodies of my two late enemies.

A glance assured us that both were dead. Richards was for informing the watch, but I saw trouble in that course, and as it was now dark, and the street at that hour quite deserted, we simply bundled them out the window and let them thud on to the pave below. I never afterwards heard of their having been discovered by the authorities, so

I infer that the marquis, who had proved himself a person of wide resource, subsequently returned and found a means of getting rid of such nasty reminiscences of his visit to my apartment.

The wretch had treated my wardrobe as shabbily as the rest of my belongings, so I was constrained to attend the Prince in the clothes I wore. him at St James's, just sitting down to dine in the old banqueting-hall of the palace, which he had tavernised with his not infrequent revelries. Twenty brilliant gentlemen attended him, but he shone forth the handsomest, and at the same time the most uncouth, of all. I noticed Lord Melville, Brummel, Eveston, Bailey and Winston Dodge, the coarsest and wittiest man in London, among the guests. The fair sex was well represented—a score of beautiful ingénues being present, chaperoned by Lady Hamilton, into whose ear Lord Welland, then on a flying visit to the capital, whispered continually.

George swore at me for being late.

'Damn your eyes,' he roared, 'we waited for you a quarter hour!'

I tapped my bandaged arm and muttered meaningly, 'I received a scratch this afternoon, your Highness, which I was forced to have attended to.'

Was it my fault that he should jump to a false conclusion? I spoke the simple truth, and yet he sprang to his feet and patted me affectionately on the shoulder, then dragged me to a seat beside him,

dispossessing no less a person than Lady Pauline Benson from her chair in order to do so. 'Sit you there,' he blustered, 'and don't Highness me, lad; to you I'm George—plain George,' and he laughed boisterously.

Melville eyed me from across the table with an incredulous stare, then turned to his companion. 'It's that damned young rascal Franks—Devenac's brother,' he muttered hoarsely, and his astounded remark sent the entire table into peals of laughter.

I bowed to him ceremoniously. 'And entirely at your service at any hour or place you please,' I assured him.

But this was treated as an even greater jest, and in a few seconds I found myself the lion of the party. The Prince recounted in a racy manner his imaginary adventure of the afternoon, and in the recital I was made to appear a veritable preux chevalier. 'And now you behold him, this young hero, wounded in my service,' concluded His Highness. 'He may be all you say, Melville, I won't gainsay that, but a man is none the worse for his wild oats, and Franks is my very good friend.'

I should have listened to this speech, I daresay, with burning ears; in reality I did feel a trifle shamed, for I discerned in the Prince's manner a sincere if sudden regard for me, but I fear it was but a momentary lapse into grace, and presently I

swaggered like a veritable coxcomb. I struck into every discourse, damned the Government, the management of the war, and aired my other political opinions with the daring of a fearless critic, and for hours kept the table in a constant peal of mirth, to the delight of the Frince and to the chagrin of every other gentleman present, for I treated the men with contempt, being incited thereto by the open encouragement of two score of the brightest eyes in England. Even Dodge could not intrude a word in edgeways, and he contented himself with muttering sarcasms behind his wine-cup. I enjoyed myself to the top of my bent, and not till the clock chimed midnight did I permit myself a single pause. But by that time, with very few exceptions, the gentlemen were drunk or had remembered their appointments. Melville was the first to go, and he retired with Lady Hamilton amidst a storm of innuendoes none too daintily expressed. No less than three invitations fell to my lot, but the Prince refused to part with me and insisted I should spend the night with him. At this Mrs Cummings gave me a glance I could not mistake, for the Prince was plainly quite intoxicated, and he kept replenishing his glass with frank abandon.

Now Jane Cummings was superlatively pretty, and her figure at once the envy and despair of all other women who aspired to the Prince's favour. But it is one thing to deceive a man in order to win his friendship. That I count pardonable if no more vital harm be intended.

Yet although I have never affected to be a mirror of the virtues, I could not bring myself to embrace the prevailing maxim that 'a man's wife is for himself, his mistress for the *monde*.' Besides, there was another appointment which I had sworn to keep.

The position was difficult but I trusted to luck, that eternal refuge of the destitute and desperate. When all had gone the Prince took my arm and staggered with me to his chamber, where he allowed me the distinguished honour of removing his boots. I think, too, he expected me to undress him, but I was spared that superlative distinction by reason of the fact that long before I had removed his second buckle he was locked in the arms of Morpheus. This pleased me, and I determined to summon his servant and quietly steal away.

Imagine my consternation to find the door bolted, and from the outside.

My thoughts flew at once to some plot against the Prince's life, and I had my rapier out in a twinkling. I quickly lighted every candle in the apartment, and searched under the bed, behind curtains, in the Prince's wardrobe, everywhere, in fact, but I could not find a living creature bigger than a mouse, which darted under the wainscot from a feast of crumbs at which I disturbed him. Plainly then I had to fear from without and not from within. My first measure

was to bar the door from within. I then commenced to examine the other entrances to the apartment. At first I could discover none, but presently drawing a curtain aside a thin bar of light arrested my attention. I approached cautiously, searched for, discovered and tried the handle; it gave softly. I turned it, but of a sudden the door was plucked from me, and there, standing in a flood of golden light, appeared an apparition of marvellous loveliness. I fell back dazed, but the lady gave a little scream at sight of my rapier. 'I found the outer door locked,' I explained sheepishly.

'And you suspected an assassin,' flashed the lady. 'But I, sir, suspected you; it was I locked the door.'

- 'Name of a dog and why?' I demanded.
- 'Because,' she returned laconically.
- 'Because why?'

She shook her head at me and took the rapier from my hand. 'Because I knew you intended to slip away,' and she put the rapier behind the door.

- 'How did you know?' I queried, feeling the while the biggest fool in London.
- 'Because Ruth told me.' She launched the shaft with venomous directness, and it struck home, but I was too experienced to let her see it.
- 'Then if you knew this, why seek to detain me?' I retorted.

But after all I was unprepared. Ah! women,

women, what inexplicable, and at the same time childish, creatures you are! and yet how you can twist us men to your wishes.

I declare that this pretty creature, in all the witchery of her night-robe, with her tiny bare pink feet softly denting the carpet, the gleam of her splendid beauties shining through her laces, and all the subtle intoxication of perfumed charms about her, chose rather the assault of tears for my undoing. She raised to mine two dark and tender orbs on whose lashes trembled: two big, glistening, liquid diamonds. 'I was jealous,' she muttered.

- 'Jealous!' I stammered.
- 'Oh, don't tell me you do not know—you have seen it often.'
- I had suspected it certainly, but I temporised. 'Seen what?' I whispered.
- 'That I love you,' she murmured, and with a gesture of passionate abandon threw herself into my arms. Our lips met in a long, madly intoxicating kiss.
- 'I worship you,' I whispered with ardour equal to her own. Closing her eyes, she allowed her head to sink upon my shoulder, half swooning. It was an unfortunate movement for her wishes, because it allowed me full vision of the Prince, who lay like a log, sleeping the sleep of peace and perfect fulness.

But the sight brought me sharply to my senses, and my conscience, generally my friend, loudly at that instant proclaimed itself my enemy. I determined to escape, but foresaw that I must not allow the lady to suspect it. She would not understand, let alone appreciate, my scruples, for a woman in love is capable of any crime. Moreover, my determination was not so perfect in itself that I could dare trifle with it, since, as I have before remarked, Mrs Cummings was a singularly beautiful woman, and I flatter myself I am competent to pass opinion in such matters.

I led her gently into her own chamber and she sank upon her couch, still in a real or affected halfswooning condition.

I dare not even glance at her lest I be tempted overmuch. I put out the lights one by one and then crept on tip-toe to the outer door.

Fortune favoured me; in her haste and emotion at entrapping me, the lady had actually left it ajar. I slipped out and hurried like a spirit from the palace. In the bracing air of morning I was able to congratulate myself on having given the devil, for once in a way, a good sound drubbing, but I am not prig enough to declare that I paid myself these compliments with any heartiness. On the contrary, I now discovered a very considerable chagrin at my virtuous renunciation, while I more than suspected that I had incurred the mortal hatred of a very powerful woman. Reflecting now, in the light of fuller experience, on such affairs I am irresistibly impelled to the con-

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clusion that a man is a fool to be anything but entirely good or entirely evil. He should first choose one course or the other, and thereafter march on without a backward glance. To a reflective temperament, wasted opportunities for either good or ill invariably furnish occasion for lasting regret.

CHAPTER V

CHANCE

RICHARDS had, during my absence, reduced the ruin of our apartments to something less of disorder, but when in the grey light of morning I once more stood among my beaten and bruised belongings, a great rage again filled my heart against the perpetrator of the damage, which only the recollection of the ten thousand pounds which he had given me could at all assuage.

I slept for a few hours, then made some excuse to get Richards out of the road so that I might satisfy a very natural curiosity. Opening the iron rubbish cage I found the skull and purse quite intact, and be assured I lost no time in examining the treasure. What a fool I must have been in the first instance, or rather, how blinded with over-happiness at my luck! The purse was quite bulky, even after the abstraction of the Treasury bills. With a little patience I discovered its secret and presently drew forth a roll of very thin foreign papers covered with writing. There was a secret, too, in the skull, for on pressing a small diamond set cunningly in

the occiput, a section came apart disclosing a cavity almost filled with a humid paste which smelt strongly of almonds. But I set myself to read the papers without troubling much about the paste, which I took for nothing more than a dainty sweetmeat.

The first I unfolded was a letter written in French, signed Talleyrand, pressing strongly upon its addressee the necessity of gaining the Naval Secretary more indubitably to the cause of France, and urging that his promises be committed to writing, or at least his receipts for remittances obtained.

The second was from Napoleon himself and contained a promise of speedy advancement if certain engagements not therein specified were fulfilled.

The third was an order on the Treasury of France for five thousand napoleons payable to the Count d'Arras. This impressed me very much, for D'Arras was much trusted in England as a loyal Bourbon adherent.

The fourth was a note from Lord Melville acknowledging the receipt of a large amount of gold bullion, and advising the remission of Treasury bills in exchange. I no longer wondered that De Sevringen had not accepted my challenge to produce or obtain the numbers of the Treasury notes which he had accused me of stealing from his person.

The fifth document was in cipher, and therefore unintelligible to me, but it was addressed to Bishop Dunne, and it bore the hall-mark of the Papal Seal.

The sixth, also in cipher, had neither address nor signature, but it was in the same handwriting as the letter signed Talleyrand.

The seventh was a receipt from Prince George for fifteen thousand pounds.

The eighth, a receipt from Mr Absin, M.P., for two hundred pounds.

The ninth, a letter from Lord Melville, declaring that certain unspecified charges were without foundation, and protesting his good faith.

The tenth was a note from the Duke of Powers, making an appointment.

The eleventh and last a letter from my brother Devenac (how well I recognised his crabbed characters!), and as its devious phrases and villainous but intangible suggestions marvellously expressed his disposition, I transcribe it without reserve:—

'MY DEAR SIR,—I have the honour to acknowledge having happily—per medium of a courier, who, extravagant man, has on the journey hither ridden the devil out of an animal for which under other circumstances I would have gladly paid at least fifteen guineas, but excuse this divagation—received a document under the impress of your hand and

seal bearing date the - day of - in the year of our Lord 1804. Referring to the request you have made, which regards, inter multa alia, my younger brother, whom I have the honour to consign to the devil, a taskmaster whose peculiar talents might perhaps be capable of holding his own in more proper estimation than I am able to bestow, I, pardon me for presuming to advise you, would suggest a careful reconnaissance before attempting to approach him. He may or may not number amongst his conquests (good heavens! that women are for the most part infernal creatures and anxious to achieve their own seduction I make no question) the ladies whose names you have been good enough (with perfect safety) to commit to my discretion. At least I am credibly informed that the Earl of - is at liberty to add to his crest a pair of horns by his ministrations. And yet I make bold to doubt, for Caruth tells me the lad is a braggart, and, so far as I can inform myself, the affair drifts along without noise. His pistol and rapier I would warn you of. He practised in his youthful days with the pistol on my father's chickens, and never accounted to me for the waste thereof. myself, the scar of a sword-thrust in my shoulder, which I owe him (the boy has a scalding tongue and he once persuaded me to play the fool; by the grace of God only I survived the encounter, for he covets my shoes and has striven hard to win

them, even to the hiring of assassins) and which one day I hope to repay. You have been so good as to lay great stress and thanks upon the poor services I have been able to render you. Your condescension has gratified my eyes, but, unfortunately, not my pocket, and I confess that I confidently expected ere this to have received a substantial advance on account of the agreements we have come to. There is the matter of a mortgage upon Carnbystows, which I ventured on a previous occasion to lay before your generous consideration. A paltry amount, certainly, two thousand pounds, but there have been so many calls upon my pocket of late that now it hangs baggy as a tied smock. Moreover, Somerset has made me an offer of his Devonshire stock for eleven hundred pounds (a bargain I would be ashamed to let pass), while Tregarthen of Ilby (an ardent admirer of your own) will let me have his ewes at two pounds per caput (his flock is only consistent of twelve hundred all told) because he is anxious to get to London to place himself at your commands. the courier who will deliver to you this memorandum I may mention that I have dispatched an invitation to my good friend the Earl of Chatham to meet me and discuss some personal policies on the same day of next month as the day of this upon which I indite these poor words. By hap your goodness may render the suggested meeting unnecessary, for I will not deny that I would converse with the

earl on money matters, and in case you can assist me, I beg you intrust my courier with the *package*, in which occasion he bears my instructions to destroy the second missive—I have the honour to subscribe myself, your obedient Servant, DEVENAC.'

I read this letter with amusement not unmixed with feelings of contempt and triumph. So Devenac, cautious boor that he was, had allowed himself to be bought by the marquis, but I dare have sworn not blindly, and the cunningly-worded but clever threat at the end of the missive laid bare to me my brother's heart. No doubt Devenac intended to make what he could from one side and then sell the whole business to the other. Only the intention to my mind was too patent, and I wondered grimly what De Sevringen thought about it. It seemed to me that I had stumbled into possession of the key to a very pretty conspiracy, and the fancy brought in its train a rush of pleasant thoughts. I lay back in my chair and dreamed, and my dreams displayed to me myself acting strange parts and walking through manifold adventures to a golden and glorious climax. myself, the graceless scamp whose follies and escapades had made him infamous in London, transformed into a patriot rendering a distinguished service to the nation, and at the last, overwhelmed with honours, walking up Cheapside on the arm of the Prince of Wales, on his way to receive the thanks

Chance

of both Houses of Parliament. Far-fetched and vainglorious visions, it is true, but they aroused in my heart wild enthusiasm and a burning spirit of enterprise and of ambition. Richards had returned but I was not conscious of his presence. With a sudden glow of ardour I crashed my fist upon the table, staring the while into vacancy. I may mention my blow sent the poor rickety table into collapse again.

'From this hour,' I muttered theatrically, but quite unconscious of that same, 'I shall cease playing the fool. From this hour I shall live a man, and by the actions of the future I shall beat into forgetfulness every disgraceful incident of my wretched past. From this hour—'

Richards interrupted me: 'Lawks!' he observed solemnly, 'wouldn't that French marquis like to be here now?'

He was quite right. On the floor lay the skull and purse, and scattered about my feet reposed the Treasury bills, and the even more priceless documents referring to the conspiracy. I was very annoyed with myself, and in consequence thereof gave Richards a well-merited flogging.

The next four days I spent in forming plans, maturing them, dismissing them, forming others, maturing them, dismissing them, until my mind was a perfect chaos for confusion and ill-temper. Richards suffered more than myself, I believe,

but then my discomfort was mental, his merely physical.

The Prince of Wales had suddenly taken it into his head to rejoin his regiment at Portsmouth: there was no one else cared or dared to disturb me. Richards, meanwhile, attended to the replenishing of my wardrobe and furniture, but I paid his work very little attention, and, to do him justice, he kept out of my way as much as possible. At the end of the fourth day I felt that I was going mad—the strain was altogether beyond me. I had always been accustomed to walk in the devil-may-care, reckless method of the gambler, and to allow the next day to care for itself without borrowing its trouble or work beforehand. It is hard to break through the habits of a lifetime, and I was pretty weary of the effort.

- 'Richards!' I shouted all on a sudden.
- 'Milord!' he gasped, edging toward the door; the rogue had most likely done something to deserve a beating and feared I had discovered it, but I reassured him.
- 'Come here, lad,' I said kindly. 'Just inform me how did I come into this windfall of the bills?'

Richards watched me like a cat from the corners of his eyes.

- 'You took them from that French gentleman, milord.'
- 'Yes,' I cried impetuously, 'but reason farther back.'
- 'I brought the Frenchy here,' declared Richards, modestly.

- 'Farther back still, you idiot!'
- 'You were going to put out your light till I persuaded you to go to sleep,' said the dolt, with a crafty look.
- 'You are a brainless ass, Richards; it was all chance!' I shouted.
- 'H'm! yes,' assented Richards, dubiously. Richards had been brought up a Methodist, and in spite of many beatings still had hankerings after chapel-going and suchlike foolishness. He was longing to give me the lie with a smiling 'Providence,' but he did not dare.
- 'How have I lived for the past ten years?' I demanded.
 - 'Cards?' suggested Richards.
 - 'Chance! you lunatic,' I corrected.
 - 'Chance?'
 - 'Yes, chance. How did you come to me?'
 - 'I brought you a letter from Mr Feversham.'
- 'But it was a chance I engaged you. I could see with half an eye you were a fool; I pitied you.'
 - 'H'm!' said Richards, disgustedly, 'chance.'
- 'Can't you see, you poor simpleton, that everything happens by chance?' I demanded.
- 'Well, if that's right, milord, how did you break your cords when you were bound the other night, and kill those two robbers and put a hole through the Frenchy's cheek was that chance?' he asked triumphantly.

'How did I get the strength which enabled me to burst the cords?' I retorted.

'You were born with it, I s'pose, my lord,' replied the incorrigible idiot.

I near wept in sheer disgust. 'It was chance again, you empty-pated clown,' I cried; 'and what's more, I vow I'm going to trust entirely to chance in future and not try to set myself against the fates, so swallow that, you clodhopper. Am I bidden anywhere to-night?'

'The Duchess of Powers sent a letter three days since, bidding you to her rout; you tore it to ribands without reading it.'

'Then how the devil do you know what was in it?' Richards actually blushed. 'I thought you'd want it after, you didn't seem yourself, so I pieced it together; here it is,' and the rogue came towards me ready to make a rush if I looked like attacking him. But I was of another mind, and that was filled with a sudden presentiment akin to inspiration.

'Chance again!' I cried blithely. 'Get me my best clothes, Richards, on the instant.'

But the rogue retired muttering uncannily to himself, and the door once open he exclaimed jeeringly, in accents of deep, almost unutterable, contempt, 'H'm! chance!'

I made at him but the door slammed in my face. It is a mistake for a man to be familiar with his lackey, and I was meditating upon a punishment meet for his insolence when the rascal burst in on me,

his face one blaze of surprise. 'This was pinned to the outside of the door,' he cried excitedly.

'This' was a pink letter folded in the figure of eight, sealed with green wax and addressed, 'To M. Caryl Franks.' I tore it open, and in very astonishment recited its contents aloud:—

'DEAR MONSIEUR,—Remembering the services which some time since you so gallantly rendered me, I am now constrained to bethink me of the principle contained so expressively in your English idiom, "One good turn deserves another." Accept the warning of one who, while in doubt as to many of her intentions, at least wishes you no ill. Your life is momentarily in danger. Be careful where and how you walk; above all, on no account visit the Duchess of P.'s rout this evening. More I cannot tell you. Farewell.

C. D'A.'

'Well,' I gasped, noting Richards gaping at me open-mouthed, 'what do you think of that? Chance! My God, it's the hand of fate.'

'It seems to me, my lord,' remarked Richards, his aspect amusingly severe, 'that this rout is a good place to stay away from.'

'But chance,' I persisted, willing that the fool should, even at the eleventh hour, see a little light.

Richards, however, moved away sullen and stubborn as a mule.

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'C. D'A.' he muttered, repeating Clarisse's initials. 'This makes the twelfth woman in ten months. Chance, ugh!'

But I was too quick for him this time, and the rogue limped off, howling dismally, to fetch my clothes.

CHAPTER VI

THE COMTE D'ARRAS

THE Duchess Elfrida was a tall and stately woman, at that time about thirty years of age, wherein she had the advantage of me by more than half a score of summers. The duke was by the way full twenty years her senior, a snarling little pock-faced nonentity. whose birthright only could account for the political influence which he enjoyed. His hate for me was the only distinct mental characteristic that he possessed. Elfrida was not a remarkably beautiful woman, but intelligent beyond praise; dignified in a grand, queenly fashion, and, moreover, good and kind-hearted to a greater degree than any other creature I have known. Her affection for me was the purest and best thing my life had known. Nothing, not even her ample knowledge of my manifold weaknesses, follies, and, indeed, to be frank, my crimes, had ever induced her to change. She loved me immeasurably above my worth, and showered upon me a wealth of sweet tenderness, the which I had long ceased to speculate upon or strive to understand. The affection of a fond mother for a spoiled and erring child most nearly resembled her attachment, and yet, in spite of her purity and the marvellous unselfishness of her devotion, she sometimes puzzled me. As for instance, I have seen her pale with jealousy if I offered attention to another woman before her. Did I come unexpectedly to her presence, she caught her hand upon her heart, breathed deeply and blushed divinely. And yet if we at any time were tête-àtête, and I attempted even so much as kiss her hand, she repelled me with a coldness too earnest to have been assumed. I have sometimes fancied that women are inexplicable to men because they often fail to understand themselves. However that may be, the heart of the Duchess of Powers was, and ever remained, a sealed book to me, and never had she appeared more mysterious than when I bent before her on that night. She regarded me with a glance of abstracted melancholy, and her eyes seemed to linger measuringly upon every article of my apparel. True, I was dressed more handsomely than ever she had seen me; my coat was of black velvet, embroidered richly with real gold, my vest of purple satin, my stockings of pure silk, while real diamonds flashed in my silver-buckled shoes. And then the hilt of my new rapier gleamed with jewels. But I felt that these things passed her by, and when her eyes met mine they shone so brightly that they almost spoke of tears.

'I have the honour to thank you humbly for your invitation, your Grace,' I murmured with a second sweeping reverence.

She smiled, and being then duty free, led me to a lounge, whereon she sate herself, and played in embarrassed fashion with her fan. The apartment was so filled with tongue-clattering crowds that we were able to converse as in a desert solitude.

- 'Where have you been this month past?' she asked. 'I have heard much account of you.'
- 'And little to my credit, I dare swear,' I answered.
- 'You mistake; to my confusion I have heard little which adds to your disgrace.'
- 'Your Grace amazes me; the world must even be growing kind.'
 - 'Or yourself changing, Franks. Which is it?'
- 'I fear me much not that; but God knows, Elfrida, I wish I were another man.'

She pressed her hand to her heart and went pale as death, while her eyes shone like stars. 'Confess you are in love!' she cried.

The accusation staggered me. 'In love?' I echoed. 'God forbid!'

But the duchess started as if in pain. 'Whatever your faults, Franks, you have never been a liar; at least let me retain that memory of you.'

I was almost too astounded for speech. I could

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have suspected a jest, but the duchess appeared too moved to allow of such a supposition.

'What lie have you been listening to?' I asked bluntly, for I was quick-tempered in those days.

But Elfrida arose and faced me. 'Lie, you say,' she muttered. 'You treat me badly, Franks, and I have ever been your friend.'

'Answer me!' I cried, angered out of my usual self-control; 'tell me whose damned lie is this, and I'll ram it down his throat.'

She smiled at my ardour, but her smile was sad, and she prepared to leave me. 'Be sure first that it is a lie,' she whispered, and in a second was lost in the crowd.

But I was not a person ever to be played with. I followed her, pushing my way forward with a recklessness that earned me many ill looks and muttered curses. I caught her at last leaning upon the arm of Mr Addington, whom I knew slightly, and who had good cause to know me, for my sword had earned him a pretty considerable fortune, although for that he had never shown me any gratitude. Truly, Dr Johnson's trite saying contains some grain of truth—'Gratitude is but a lively expectation of favours to come.' There was only one life between Addington and the title he craved for. But I was no bravo, and he knew it. He had even cut me in the street quite lately, but I greeted him now with superb forgiveness.

'You will hate me robbing you of your partner, Mr Addington,' I said suavely, 'but Her Grace has sent for me.'

Her Grace smiled at my impudence, though I confess it deserved no such indulgence. 'Twas but to give you a message, my lord,' she answered. 'A friend expects you in my green room.' Her eyes at the same time said so much to me that I fell back with a low reverence.

I turned at the door and found her glance had followed me; her regard was sad as death, but mocking, scornful and full of pride.

Annoyed almost past endurance, I strode along the passage towards a room I knew full well from much sweet dalliance there. I threw the door open without knocking, in sheer ill-temper at my errand. and entered. A pair of huge chandeliers, ablaze with lights, cast a golden radiance, which dazzled my vision after traversing the long dark corridor. For a second I was almost blinded, then, sight returning. I was stricken blind indeed and speechless. A maid most brilliantly attired and all ablaze with jewels stood in the very centre of the room, and on my so rude entrance she fell back a pace or two with a pretty gesture of alarm. Even at this distance I might make bold to describe her costume, but my hardihood stops short on remembrance of the dazzling beauty of her face. I had been accustomed to receive many favours at the hands of

women, and a score of unsought conquests had given me somewhat of a general disdain for the sex, so that I was wont to bear myself before women with a certain manner of arrogance. But here all such affectations deserted me, and I stood like a fool, dumb, abashed, and lost in marvel at the wonderful loveliness of this maid, whom, strange to say, in some sort I seemed to recognise.

And for her part, after the first breath of alarm at my intrusion, she returned my stare as though I had been good to look upon. It seemed an age before our glances parted; she first looked down, blushing faintly, and I, a tithe, perhaps, recovered, bowed to the ground before her.

'Ten thousand pardons, madam,' I stammered, 'for my rudeness. I entered expecting to find a friend awaiting me.'

She flashed at me a glance that set my blood a-dance. 'And do you count me of your enemies?' she murmured, in a voice that charmed my senses like soft music.

'What!' I cried. 'Is it possible? You are-'

'Clarisse d'Arras at your service, milord, and desolate at having been so utterly forgotten.'

'Forgotten, never!' I muttered; 'but you are a fairy or a witch! Remember I have seen you before but once, then you were beautiful, but now—are you flesh and blood or an angel?' The strange part of it was that I found myself quite

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in earnest. Those phrases, which are the natural coin men's lips, by way of *devoir*, pay to women's hearts, came readily enough to my tongue, but no longer in their transit planted the covert sting of a sneer at their extravagance.

'Flatterer!' cried the countess, with an assumption of hauteur; 'nay, do not protest' (as she saw me about to speak) 'your denial would be a compliment still more fulsome, that is if I know aught of you men.' Then, like a weathercock or a woman, she straightway turned herself into a child, me into an imbecile with admiring rapture.

'What do you think of my gown?' she asked, with all the artless grace of a baby.

I declare she drove me distracted. 'It's beautiful enough, I daresay,' I muttered, 'but it's tawdry to your face.'

She held up a finger with a pretty air of admonition. 'But come and sit by me,' she cried, 'I have much to say to you.' I seated myself beside her, half a-dream, on a long, low couch. 'I have to thank you for your letter of advice, though, thank heaven! I did not heed its warning.'

The countess broke into a rippling laugh. 'My letter?' she flashed; 'twas the duchess wrote it.'

'What!' I cried, clean befogged.

'It was this way,' she answered confidingly. 'I wanted to beg a favour of you and I did not know how to reach you. I had told the duchess

of your kindness to me that day—do you remember?' She said she had invited you here to-night, but I thought you might have elsewhere to attend for the duchess said that your life was in constant danger. But I knew you were brave, and I, who cannot spell your English tongue, made her write warning you not to come, and then I was sure you would. Was I not wise?'

'Wise!' I echoed, amazed at this child's knowledge of a man's nature. 'Ay, indeed. But what service can you require of me?'

She pouted her scarlet lips till I had to hold myself back from recklessly attempting a taste of their sweetness.

- 'Promise first,' she whispered.
- 'Anything,' I cried.
- 'On your word?'
- 'Why, yes.'
- 'Say after me—I, Caryl Franks, promise you, Clarisse d'Arras, on my word of honour as a gentleman, to do anything you ask me.'

I must have been bewitched—I, the cool-headed gambler—for I repeated the formula without a fragment of hesitation.

'Then,' said the countess, 'I want you to accompany me to France to-morrow night.'

'The devil!' I muttered, quite aghast. 'This is my bad day!' I arose and paced across the

room in a chaos of agitation. It flashed to my mind that here was a trap set for me by my enemies; not for a moment did I suspect the girl, but then a decoy may be deadly, however innocent of evil; a painted wooden duck can lure wild, loving birds to death. But the girl stared at me, plainly confounded by my demeanour and catching her glance I came to a stand. 'You promised,' she said tremulously.

'Who put this matter in your head?' I demanded sternly.

Her lip trembled, she looked like a scolded child.

- 'You promised, monsieur,' she repeated.
- 'You must give me a reason,' I said coldly.

She came and stood by me. 'The day after to-morrow, monsieur, if I stay in England, I must wed a man whom I loathe and hate and despise!' Her breast heaved and her eyes glowed with an emotion impossible to describe. If simulated, she was an actress greater than any other living.

- 'His name?' I asked.
- 'The Marquis de Sevringen.'

I fell back stupefied. 'But your brother, mademoiselle, he would not force you to the arms of a man for whom you entertain such aversion.'

Tears stood in the girl's eyes. 'Henri loves me well, monsieur,' she muttered in a voice that went to my heart; 'but he is in that bad man's power.'

'Name of a dog!' I cried angrily, 'and to save himself he would sacrifice his sister.'

'Ah, no, m'sieur, it is Henri's own idea. He has arranged it all. On Wednesday morning, at daylight, a sloop will sail from Gravesend which will take me to France and to the Empress Josephine, who has promised to protect me. It will appear that I have fled of my own accord. Surely the marquis will not blame Henri if he does not suspect him.'

'But where do I come in?' I asked in amaze.

'Ah, monsieur, it is to your goodness that we look for everything. Marquis de Sevringen would never believe that I could have disappeared without help. It is proposed, therefore, that I should leave behind me a letter' (here she blushed divinely) 'declaring that I have run away with some gentleman to Scotland to be m-married, monsieur. The marquis is aware that I know you; he hates you and he would believe.'

'But it seems to me,' I objected, suspicious in spite of a proposition I found quite enchanting, 'that your purpose would be just as well achieved if I were to disappear for a while. I mean,' I added bluntly, 'in all this I see no necessity for me to quit England.'

Mademoiselle drew herself away, very plainly offended.

'I am foolish to have expected too much from

you, milord. I beg you to forgive me. I shall seek a protector elsewhere.'

'A protector?' I gasped.

The girl threw out her arms with a little tragic gesture.

'The sloop which will bear me to France is a smuggling craft, milord, commanded by rough men, and my unhappy position forbids that I be accompanied by any woman, even my maid.'

I shuddered to think of such a situation for this delicate and undefended lady, but my suspicions were by no means allayed.

'Is there no one of your older friends, mademoiselle, who might—'

She interrupted me. 'I have no friends, milord, only lovers, and they are all bound to the service of De Sevringen. Henri himself would risk all to be with me, but it would mean his ruin and would work no good.'

'Is the duchess aware of all this?' I questioned suddenly.

The girl's face went crimson under my inspection. 'It is she who has vouched to my brother for your good faith, milord.' She whispered the words in charming confusion.

This news confounded me, but I urged a last plea.

'But when we shall have arrived in France, mademoiselle, how will it fare with me? I am an

Englishman, and England wages war with France.'

The girl for answer took from her bosom a small square of paper which she handed me without speaking. It was a passport and safe-conduct signed by Napoleon himself, and gave to Henri, Comte d'Arras, the privilege of visiting, journeying through and quitting France for purposes of State.

'But,' I cried in perplexity, 'this is for your brother!'

She smiled bewitchingly. 'There are few persons left in France who know my brother save in name, milord.'

I gasped for breath, for in a flash I could perceive that a great, a glorious prospect had opened its arms to embrace me.

- 'Not Napoleon?' I demanded sharply.
- 'No, milord.'
- 'Not Talleyrand?'
- 'No, milord.'
- 'But Fouché. Surely Fouché?'
- 'Not even Fouché, milord, although Henri met him once in disguise when General Pichegru was arrested. But in any case there is no need for alarm, milord, since you are to return to England as soon as you desire. The smugglers have been well paid and they have engaged to bring you back immediately I am landed—if such be your wish.'

It was impossible to misunderstand the note of contempt she threw into these last words, but I laughed out merrily and put the passport in my pocket. 'My dear little sister, permit me to salute you!' I cried, and advanced a step. She threw me a glance which at once disdained and consented. I put a hand on her waist, and her big eyes staring deep into mine I kissed her lightly on the lips. I felt her body shiver against me like an aspen leaf. But of a sudden she broke away, panting like a wild thing and aflame with passion. 'How dare you?' she muttered. 'How dare you?' and burst into a storm of weeping.

God send a patient men to such a woman for the sake of two creatures at least. I own I could have sworn like a moss-trooper I was so exasperated, more especially as it was thus Elfrida found us. She turned upon me the eyes of a lioness at bay.

'Coward!' she cried. 'Could you not see the girl is a baby just from her convent?'

'And a damned coquette to boot,' I snarled.

'Go!' she commanded sternly. 'D'Arras waits you in the card-room.'

I strode off without a backward glance, black murder in my heart.

D'Arras was there and evidently awaiting me, for the moment I entered he cast a look my way and full of question. But I was none too pleased with myself, and therefore at odds with the world.

I eyed him disdainfully. 'Will you play, milord?' he asked, quite disconcerted.

'lt's too hot,' I declared uncivilly.

But half the room stared at me in wonder.

'Franks says it's too hot to play,' said Lord Feversham in a voice so comical that his words were greeted with a roar of laughter.

'Quite so, my lord,' I retorted pointedly, 'but in the garden I fancy it is cool enough for a pleasant walk.'

Feversham, who was a full-blooded youngster, would have taken me at the word, but Frank Eveston forced him to keep his chair. 'Bosh!' he cried cheerily. 'What's the matter with you to-night, Franks; the words were uttered in jest.'

I saw I was wrong, and I am not one of these heartless creatures who would kill a man out of pure malice; moreover, I admired the boy's courage. He could barely handle a sword in those days, though in after years he acquired a pretty knowledge of fence, as the notorious Colonel Elby learned to his cost.

'The fact is I have a headache,' I said lightly, 'and if needs must I'll try the garden by myself, unless you'd care to join me, my lord,' and I turned to D'Arras.

He jumped at the opportunity.

'But with pleasure,' he cried and took my arm.

A buzz of comment followed us, but I fancy

neither of us cared. Once in the shrubbery and in a place we made quite certain was free from observation, D'Arras faced me impatiently. 'Well, milord,' he muttered, 'I assume from this meeting that you have consented to oblige us.'

- 'Upon certain conditions, count,' I replied coldly.
- 'Name them.'
- 'Well, in the first place I require to be satisfied of your good faith. How am I to know that this is not a plot of your friend De Sevringen to be rid of me?'
- 'You have my word of honour, milord,' said D'Arras with earnestness.

I bowed. 'I am sure you will not misunderstand me, count, when I say that I require even greater assurance; but there are matters of politics between me and the marquis, and he appears to be a weighty man in your concerns from even the little your sister has informed me.'

The count considered deeply for a moment.

'True,' he said, 'from your standpoint your request is not unreasonable. The fact is, milord, that I have great hopes for my sister. This upstart, Napoleon, whom may God blight, has, in his effort to buy me to his cause, offered me an alliance which I am disposed to accept, more especially as it in no way pledges me in return. He offers to marry my sister to the Crown Prince of W—— provided merely that I place Clarisse under the protection of his wife—

diable—the Empress Josephine. You see the upstart is anxious to surround himself with good blood and the nobles of France stand aloof.'

'Can you trust such promises, count?' I inquired contemptuously.

'He dare not break them!' cried D'Arras with anger.

I shrugged my shoulders incredulously. 'And your sister—she is in favour of this alliance?'

The count swore under his breath. 'She knows nothing of it. I have kept her purposely in ignorance, but she would gladly welcome any fate which might save her from a marriage with De Sevringen, whom she hates, and I—and I.' He repeated these words with savage emphasis, but nevertheless my suspicions were alive again.

'And the proof of what you say?'

I believe that D'Arras would gladly have knifed me by this, but he forced himself to composure, and drawing from his pocket a paper he pressed the same upon me. 'Read this at your leisure, my lord, and return it me to-morrow.' I may state here that the paper was a formal letter from the Corsican Emperor to the count, proposing a marriage on the terms which D'Arras had revealed to me.

'One question more, count,' said I, after I had safely bestowed this missive, 'where is the Marquis de Sevringen this evening?

D'Arras gave a cynical laugh.

- 'Would you credit it, milord?' he snarled. 'He believes that on Wednesday next he will wed with my sister, and yet to-night, to my certain knowledge, he reposes in the arms of the fair Mrs Cummings.'
- 'What! the Prince's mistress?' I gasped in sheer astonishment.
 - 'It is nevertheless true,' declared the count.
 - I scarce knew why, but this news made me shiver.
 - 'What ails you?' asked D'Arras.
- 'A goose is walking over my grave,' I answered solemnly, but the count did not understand. proceeded forthwith to give me minute instructions about the journey and my care for his sister. His plan was that, after landing at Brest, I should escort the countess to Versailles, using his passport en route, and then, without hazarding an interview with any person other than a lackey or a soldier, hurry back by another route to Boulogne, to which port the sloop would in the meantime proceed and there await my arrival. He promised that he would provide his sister with an ample stock of French money for us both and all other things needful, and that I should have a thousand pounds for my trouble on my return. Finally he approached the last portion of his designs, 'To-morrow,' he declared, 'I must spend all my time with De Sevringen in order to allay any doubt which may subsequently arise in his mind of my good faith. In the morning I shall take care that he sees my sister. During that time,

which will be between breakfast and noon, it will be wise for you to proceed to Gravesend and there await my sister's arrival in the hotel called the Red Anchor.

'She will follow you in the early afternoon and remain in your charge until after midnight, when I hope I shall be with you. At daylight a boat will put off to receive you from the sloop, and then—' He shrugged his shoulders expressively.

I assented gravely. 'I shall in all things do my best,' I assured him.

'Remember,' said the count, sternly, 'I charge you with my sister's honour.'

I disliked the reminder, but replied coldly, 'It will be safe in my keeping.'

He bowed. 'I have every confidence in you, milord.'

And then we separated lest we should be seen entering the house together. I own I felt a certain admiration for the man; it was impossible but to believe that he was a triple traitor—to England, to Napoleon and to the dethroned Bourbon king—and yet he bore himself with a fine dignity, the consequence of his princely blood, perhaps.

I searched for the duchess everywhere to take my leave of her, and found her, after long seeking, alone in the green room. She was pale and cold as snow.

I bent before her and murmured softly: 'I come

to say farewell, Frida, perhaps for ever.' I was not all insincere, for my errand was full of peril.

'It were better so,' she answered.

'And is that your kindest thought of me?' I asked reproachfully.

She raised her eyes to mine and I could have wept for the sadness there. Then of a sudden she threw herself, for the first time in all our intercourse, unreservedly upon me. 'Swear to me you do not love her!' she cried passionately, gazing at me as if she would read my very soul.

'Whom?' I asked quickly.

'Clarisse,' she muttered.

For the life of me I could not answer her. I could not truthfully say either yes or no, and to Elfrida I would not lie.

She detected my embarrassment and swept from me on the instant, hiding her face in her hands. And yet this woman knew that in the past I had been a rake, a spendthrift of emotions, and she had never chided me for that. I was in a maze to understand her, but her grief cut me to the heart and I approached her full of gentleness.

'Dear friend,' I said softly, 'bid me love or not to love and I will serve you faithfully. In all things I am yours, and gladly, gratefully; the sweetest and best woman God has been pleased to make.'

But she turned to me next instant, her lashes wet with tears and her eyes shining with a light I

have seen but once since then in the eyes of any human being—a light which made me feel in the same moment base and noble, and brought a hardness in my throat which bereft me of power to speak. 'Go, Franks,' she muttered brokenly, 'and God keep you; only—kiss me once before you go.'

I stooped and our lips met in a long, clinging kiss, a kiss which, my soul be the forfeit if I mistake, failed to spot her saintly purity. God bless such women, say I; they are rare, but where they exist weak men are transformed to better creatures in spite of all the machinations of the devil.

Elfrida fell to the couch half swooning, and I, with a nameless sorrow aching all my heart, walked blindly to the door, and hurried thence with set face like one who walks in dreams.

CHAPTER VII

A SUPERLATIVE COQUETTE

Now Richards, though a fool, was, on the whole, a a good lad and a faithful. I debated for long whether or no I should give him an inkling as to my designs, but in the end, precisely for the reason that he was a fool, I took him into my confidence before I set out for Gravesend, in this wise.

'I shall be absent some days, Richards,' I observed casually. While stuffing my pockets with sundry cosmetics, scents and powders, I watched him through half-closed lids. His eyes were fastened in charmed fashion on De Sevringen's little toy scull.

- 'Indeed, milord,' he said, surprised.
- 'Fact is, Richards, I'm thinking of a trip to Devonshire to see my brother Devenac.'

Richards gave an incredulous grin. 'When do you start, my lord?'

- 'Immediately.'
- 'H'm! What shall I say if you are wanted?'
- 'Just that, Richards.'
- 'And when will your lordship return?'

'When you see me again, Richards, I shall have returned.'

'Then there's a woman in it,' muttered the lad, angrily.

Richards hated me to have aught to do with women and never troubled to conceal his feelings. I laughed outright. 'And a very pretty one this time, Richards,' I cried gaily and I handed him a ten-pound note.

'Amuse yourself while I am absent, boy. Goodbye.'

He would scarcely take the note, he was in such ill temper, and he refused altogether to say good-bye. 'It means "God be wi' ye,"' he explained, 'and it's more like the devil will be your company. I'll just say farewell.'

With a laugh I swung out, but I took the precaution to gain another street before I hired a carriage, for Richards had a trick of curiosity that would have made his fortune as a policeman.

I arrived at Gravesend just before noon and took a room at the Red Anchor, an evil-smelling hostel overhanging the wharves. The inn was choked full with sailor men, a rough lot of creatures who wore long pigtails, and spat out tobacco juice unceasingly. The place smelled horribly of rum and stale beer, and was elsewise so dirty and disgusting that I marvelled that D'Arras had not chosen a more befitting spot for his sister's reception.

The bedroom above all was so filthy that I was

constrained to seek refuge in the common parlour, and having there entrenched myself in a corner I watched the scene before me with what of interest I might find therein. The sailor men were at first reduced to wondering silence at my presence and fine clothes. They nudged each other and whispered together hoarsely; one declared I was a highwayman, another that I was a naval officer, while a third guessed me as a French refugee.

Soon the conversation became general, however, and turned on the war, many open insults being offered to the French Navy, for Villeneuve was then hiding in port with his fleet, apparently afraid to give Nelson battle in spite of many tempting chances. I soon found that the object of this was to draw me out, for the third man's guess seemed to have been unanimously adopted. I listened, smiling gravely at their coarse jests; I had no mind to come to loggerheads with any man just then. But they would not let me be. One big creature, with a greasy face and a cock eye, insisted I should drink with him, and after a dozen refusals I consented in order to stop his persecution. I called for wine. The innkeeper laughed boisterously and brought out a bottle of French brandy. 'It's the nearest to wine I keep, yer honour,' he declared. But it was good stuff and served.

'To your good health,' I said, raising my glass to my tormentor. But he put a dirty paw on my wrist. 'Never mind my health,' he growled. 'I'll give you a better toast—To hell with France and Bony!'

'With all my heart!' cried I, and drained my glass amid a roar of applause.

But Cock-eye was still dissatisfied.

- 'If you're not a froggy, what the blazes are you?' he demanded.
 - 'A man,' I replied.
- 'Yah! but what sort? You're not here for nothing, you with your fine togs.'

I glanced around, but everybody's sympathy was with the bully; he was mouthpiece for all. I reflected that were I to resent interference it would work but little good, so I caught at the first lie which occurred to me. 'Well,' I said, with a reckless laugh, 'I promise you I could satisfy you safe enough, and would, could I trust to your discretion.' There followed a chorus of growls and protestations. 'Strike them blind, they were not spies to put away a man if he was a good sort. Did I take them for longshore lubbers of police craft?'

I called for drinks for all, and while the landlord was gone to fetch them I muttered mysteriously, 'I belong to Somerset and they want me over there'—I pointed to London—'for a matter of two or three lightened purses at Reading. Fact is, I came to London all along of a wench and I was recognised and had to bolt for it. I threw the dogs off the scent, though, and they're looking for me now in Hounds-

ditch. The wench joins me here to-day, and to-night we'll flit by water down the coast a bit in a craft the girl has arranged for.'

I had counted by importing the female element on gaining their hearts, and I was not disappointed. 'Here's to the wench, God bless her!' cried one, and the rest shouted approval; all save Cock-eye, who still regarded me suspiciously.

'You've no the look of a seaman,' he growled.

'Nor don't pretend to,' I snarled back just as readily. 'I know more of a horse's back, and sword or pistol too, if a pinch arrives.'

'And this craft—what name does she carry?' demanded the sailor.

I foresaw I should have to kill the brute, but I answered drily, 'You know as much as me. She can be called Beelzebub an' I care not, so long as I get safely off in her.'

The man growled something under his breath and would have made off, but I forestalled him.

- 'Where would you go?' I muttered, facing him.
- 'What the hell is that to you?'
- 'A lot, since my life happens to hang on a word as I've just told you.'
- 'Be damned to you!' he shouted. 'Out of the way!' and laid his rough hands on me. I found a greasy stain on the ruffles afterwards. He had, however, the misfortune to misjudge me. I look to possess but the strength of one ordinary person, perhaps less,

for I am slight of build, but then looks often deceive. In a second he was sprawling on the floor among the vile refuse there, and I fancy his head ached bravely, for I had struck him squarely on the jaw. There was breathless silence for a moment during which no man moved; but presently he got to his feet grasping an ugly-looking hanger. I met him with the rapier, and in two passes sent my blade through his body. The sailors eyed me in utter amaze a while, and then there followed a buzz of exclamations. Two of them went to the fallen bully, and in rough-and-ready fashion tried to staunch his wound, which was not desperate, for I had taken care not to kill him.

- 'Who and what is he?' I demanded. But the landlord who had arrived on the scene sidled up to me and drew me apart.
- 'He is master of the Cuckoo,' he said mysteriously.
- 'Well?' said I, for the words gave me no light.
- 'The Cuckoo sails at dawn, your honour,' said the landlord with a meaning wink.
 - 'And if it does?' I muttered stupidly.
- 'Does not your honour sail sometime thereabouts?'

Bah! I saw it all. I had disabled the man on whom D'Arras depended to put us across the Channel. What cursed ill-luck! I turned all a-

tremble to the wounded bully, who by this had recovered consciousness.

'Have him taken to my room,' I commanded. But he made a sign to some of his companions and they helped him to his feet. 'Take me off,' he muttered; 'one of you get the boat ready.' I stood like a fool and watched them go. At the door he turned, his coarse face red with passion, his eyes lurid with hate. 'I'll even up with you for this if I live,' he growled. 'An' don't think I don't know you, my lord; I come from Devon, I do.' Five minutes after I watched them from the tavern door lower him into a boat and pull off across stream, where half a hundred schooners and crafts of all rig swung at their anchors. So, after all, Cock-eye knew me! His last address and his allusion to my birthplace could have been no chance shot.

It may be guessed that I was not in a good mood to receive my charge when she arrived, even although the landlord had assured me that John Masters, (Cock-eye's proper name) would keep his engagement in spite of fifty wounds. However I bought Boniface body and soul with a ten-pound note and promised him a hundred more if he would arrange to have a second craft in readiness if the first failed. He made no secret, though, that the pis aller was a floating tomb at best, the only procurable, and its master both a shark and shiftless, so the adventure all told stood likely to cost me five hundred pounds if we were

forced to get away in her. I could only hope and pray that Cock-eye would prove such a man of his word as the landlord thought him.

The countess arrived at three precisely. She greeted me with great coldness, barely touched my hand, and asked to be shown at once to her room. She looked pale and disdainful, and was plainly at odds with herself to be even barely civil to me.

As my bedroom was the only guest-chamber in that den, I gave it to her, and the more readily seeing that I would not have bidden there myself for a pension.

After the door had closed upon her I stood in the hall-way wondering grimly how long her nerves would endure solitude in such a hovel. But I grinned to myself; solitude is a bad word. She would not lack company for the place was alive. She stood it bravely for perhaps the third of an hour, then I heard a little shriek, and she burst out and came to me, shuddering.

'I must have another room,' she cried, 'that place is horrible!'

I made my best bow, and answered gravely, 'Madam, I should like nothing better than to meet your wishes, but it is impossible; that room is the only one vacant, and, in fact, the best that this house affords.'

'But it is filled with cockchafers and—' She hesitated.

'And other creatures.' I completed the sentence for her.

She went white to the lips. 'But is there nowhere else I may go?' she cried imploringly.

'There is the tap-room, but that is filled with rough folk and ankle deep in tobacco juice.'

'Mon Dieu! what shall I do? And there is yet so long to wait.'

Mademoiselle was not nearly so disdainful by this; indeed she looked helpless and ready to weep. Outside a fine steady rain had commenced to fall, and a mist was creeping over the river like a monstrous white hand with outstretched fingers of fog.

'We might try the wharves were it not for the wet,' I suggested, but she caught me up eagerly, and presently we sallied forth into the drizzle. I found a nook at last all that could be desired, quite close at hand, and, what was even more important, entirely screened from observation. It lay amidst a mass of lumber, and with the aid of a lurking piece of sail-cloth I made a roof, and spread a rug within as a seat for the maid.

There was barely room for two, but I chose to stay without rather than appear to press my company.

'But this is splendid!' cried Clarisse.

I shrugged my shoulders. 'If it pleases you I am happy,' I said, and commenced to march to and fro, none too pleased, however, with the rain.

Mademoiselle curled herself up in the rug like a

big squirrel and set herself to watch me. It is true that before ten minutes had passed I believed her the most selfish dame alive, but I never paused in my march and affected to be quite indifferent. Then a small voice disturbed my angry meditations.

- 'You are very silent, monsieur.'
- 'And you also, mademoiselle,' I retorted.

Another five minutes of silence then, 'Is it very wet out there, monsieur?'

- 'Very,' I replied sourly.
- 'And cold?'
- 'Well, chilly, mademoiselle.'
- 'It is quite dry and warm in here, monsieur.'
- 'Mademoiselle has my felicitations on her good fortune,' I growled, and resumed my sentry-go.

Ten minutes crawled by this time, then, in a very small voice indeed, 'Would monsieur—it—ah!—there is room here for two.'

I suppose I was ill-tempered, for I replied with sarcasm, 'I fear to discommode mademoiselle.'

- 'But you will be all wet.' 'Twas nothing but a whisper.
- 'I am already wet,' I replied sourly; 'pray do not trouble yourself about me.' A moment later I heard a queer little smothered sound like a child's whimper, and turning, to my amazement saw the girl, her face in her hands, sobbing as if her heart would break. Was ever such a mixture?

I ran to her at once. 'You are crying. What is it?'

I demanded. I tried to draw away her hands, but she only wept the more. I felt a useless brute and quite befogged. 'God save us! what is the matter?' I stammered.

'Oh, how wretched I am!' she moaned. 'Everybody hates me.'

'Hates you!' I gasped

'Yes; don't say it is not true. You would rather stay out there in the rain and be wet through than come and sit in here with me, you know you did—boo-hoo, boo-hoo!'

What was a man to do? What could any man have done?

For me I confess I was fair beside myself with rage and pity and wonder, but plumping down beside her I picked the witch up just as if she had been a veritable baby, and thinking nothing but of soothing her grief, set her on my knees and rocked her in my arms.

It was strange to feel how small she was, how dainty and how soft.

It was stranger to know, harder to understand, that she made no effort to free herself but just lay there and nestled in my arms as though I had been her mother. And gods, how she sobbed!—big sobs that heaved up all her poor frame and seemed to issue from her heart. 'There, my pet, did they, the naughties; don't cry, darling; poor pet, poor little duckey,' I mumbled, trying to recall long-forgotten,

childish names of endearment, but my vocabulary stuck just there, and I repeated the phrases sure a hundred times, smoothing her hair the while and doing all in my power to heal her sorrow. By-andby, hours it seemed to me, for faith I was growing weary, she had quite ceased greeting, with the exception of an occasional tired sob. I stole a glimpse at her face at last, and, as I am a living man, she was sound asleep! It took me a quarter hour to realise the fact, and when I had thoroughly digested it I wasted full another in trying to understand. Thereafter I gave the matter up as beyond me and laid her gently down upon the rug, so that she still slept on, smiling softly and happily like I had heard is the habit of slumbering infants. Pretty soon I tiptoed off quietly to the inn, and having made the landlord cognisant of our whereabouts in case of contingencies, I besought him for a lanthorn and our supper, and carried all back with me to the retreat, anticipating that mademoiselle would wake hungry, and prefer to eat her meal al fresco there than in that noxious cupboard of a hostel. She was still sound, and I sat watching her till dark, when I went to light the lanthorn and the clatter roused her. 'What has happened?' she cried, starting up alarmed, 'where am I?'

I was busy with flint and steel. 'Still here,' I answered cheerily; 'nothing has happened. I'm about to give you your supper.' Here the wick caught and

I glanced at her. She was actually smiling, and she watched my movements delightedly. 'Hungry?' I asked.

'Oh, yes, mon Dieu! yes. What have you to eat?'

I examined the parcel. 'Cheese, bread, ale, red herrings, butter—ugh, rancid!' (I threw the stuff promptly overboard), 'and cress.'

'Splendid!' she cried, her eyes sparkling. There was not much affectation about mademoiselle just then. She ate a meal which would have done credit to an old campaigner, chattering all the while like a magpie.

I confess when she had finished I was lost in admiration. She drank half the ale too, and pretended to like it. We were quite old cronies when all was done, disposed to laugh at every discomfort, and marvellously pleased each with the other.

'I'll tell you what,' I cried in a moment of enthusiasm, 'you please me, mademoiselle; you're a brick.'

'And,' she cried with equal fervour, 'I like you too, monsieur; you are a gentleman not to have kissed me,' and then she flushed crimson, face, neck, forehead to the very roots of her hair.

- 'Eh, what?' I cried, quite aghast.
- 'Nothing,' she said, 'nothing,' but turned her face from the light.
 - 'Mademoiselle,' I said sternly.
 - 'Monsieur,' such a little tiny voice.

- 'You have been playing with me.'
- 'Monsieur, I-I-'
- 'Mademoiselle, you only pretended to be asleep.'
- 'I—I—'
- 'Mademoiselle, you are a very wicked girl.' I spoke like the magistrate who had once addressed me at the County Court. It was very effective. She gave a whimper.
- 'No doubt,' I proceeded severely, 'your tears also were a mock.'

Silence.

'Well,' said I, leaning back and folding my arms, 'all I have to say is this—I am disgusted with you.'

The silence which followed this remark could have been cut with a knife for the best part of the next hour. The only sound to be heard was the occasional lapping of water against the piles of the wharf beneath us.

In truth I was more amused than offended, and often had much ado to repress a laugh as my thoughts repeated the matter. But I was conscious the little vixen watched me, so I kept a face of iron. The silence was broken by neither of us, but of a sudden the landlord of the inn crept before us like a ghost, whereon the maid screamed out in terror. Even I started, he had approached so noiselessly. 'Is your honour mad?' he cried. 'I warned ye not to let the light glim on the water, and here it is a beacon to tempt any passer. Shiver my

timbers! I saw it from my window, and it gave me a blue turn. Lucky I saw it in time; the revenue cutter passes at eight and it's nigh a quarter to.'

I mumbled out some excuse, for the fellow had warned me, and little as I liked his tone, he meant well. 'Let's shade it,' I suggested, but we found this quite impossible, for a glare always showed out.

'Either ye'll must sit in the dark or come up to the inn,' said the landlord, 'but I warn ye, ye'll be best here; there's a rough lot drinking now, and more to follow.'

I turned to the girl. 'Shall we go to the inn?' I asked curtly.

'Oh, no, not that,' she entreated.

The landlord promptly doused the glim and left us, saying, 'When the gent comes I'll bring him straight along to yer honour.'

The silence was resumed, with the difference that now we were in impenetrable gloom, the only lights visible being the far-off gleams of ship lamps, and they were dimmed with the mist.

Once the maid moved, once I heard her fetch a sigh. Then after a long, dense pause she muttered tremulously, 'I'm so frightened, monsieur.'

'Believe me, there is no occasion,' I replied frigidly. I felt a brute, but I wanted to get the upper hand of this enigma, by fair means or foul; my head was clean turned with her methods and manners,

Quite another hour passed, then a pitiful little voice whispered, 'I'm so sorry, won't you forgive me?'

- 'No.'
- 'Ah, monsieur!'
- 'No.'
- 'Please, monsieur.'
- 'No.' I was aching to relent, though.

Silence for five minutes, then a whisper—faint as a breath, 'I was wrong, I know; it was wicked of me; you may beat me if you like, monsieur.'

- 'I have no desire to beat you, mademoiselle.'
- 'Then kiss me—anything—only forgive me!' and the amazing child was in my arms, clinging to me, fondling me.
- 'Oh, I am so frightened of the dark,' she moaned' It is full of big eyes that glare at me so!'
 - 'Mademoiselle,' I said sternly.
 - 'Yes, monsieur.'
- 'If you wish me to forgive you, answer me a question.'
 - 'Yes, monsieur.'
 - 'Have you such a thing as a heart about you?'
- 'Why, yes, monsieur.' Oh! such surprise in her voice; such innocence!
- 'Then how dare you trifle with a poor man like this?'
 - 'Kiss me,' she whispered.
 - But I was thoroughly exasperated. 'I'll be

damned if I do, you little coquette!' I cried sharply.

She started away as from a blow, and for a while I sat there biting my lips at my brutality. 'She is only a child,' I reflected in utter self-abasement, but my cursed pride kept me tongue-tied. This for an hour while that baby suffered heaven knows what horrors in terror of the dark.

Then came a sudden splash as an eight-oar boat swept past us, leaving a long trail of phosphorescence in its wake. She suppressed a scream and caught my arm. 'Oh, if monsieur would only let me hold his hand,' she muttered, 'I will be good, so good!'

I caught the poor thing in my arms. 'See here, baby,' I muttered, 'I'm sorry I swore at you, will you forgive me?'

- 'Yes, monsieur.' Tears were trickling down her cheeks on to my hands.
- 'And look, I don't want to buy your kisses, child. I'm not such a cad as that.'
- 'N-no, monsieur, I know; you were good and didn't kiss me while I was asleep.'
 - 'Pretended to sleep,' I corrected.

But she did not answer, only nestled closer to me, entirely content with her circumstances so far as I could judge.

Presently she asked hesitatingly,-

- 'You don't hate me very much, do you, monsieur?'
- 'Hate you! Don't be foolish, child.'

Women are never satisfied; I had just imagined her content. It will be perceived how false was my conclusion.

- 'Do you think am I at all pretty, monsieur?' she asked after a long pause.
 - 'Very,' I assured her.
- 'Men like to kiss pretty women, monsieur. Is it not so?'

I smothered a laugh. 'That is a weakness of most of my sex, I believe.'

- 'Then you must hate me some,' observed mademoiselle with a note of triumph in her voice.
 - 'Why?' I demanded.
 - 'Because you have refused to kiss me.'

It was dark and I could not see her face, but I really hope that she blushed; she assured me subsequently that she did, and as she blushed when she gave me the assurance I believe it possible. For me her words brought the old Adam to my soul. There came a buzzing in my ears, my blood danced, my nerves jingled to the old, familiar tune. I raised her chin with my hand and brought her face to mine, then stooped and kissed her full upon the lips.

Heavens, the magic of that kiss! Its very memory has ever since been powerful to stir my heart, to warm my body through and through like a deep draught of old rich wine. In that caress I sold myself—brain, heart and soul—miles deep in a love that has never faded and, while I live, will never fade.

And she, the witch, kissed me too, I think. I am scarcely sure, but she sighed deep, low and long, and hid her face thereafter on my shoulder. Thus we rested heaven knows how long! I was not conscious of the flight of time. It was she who broke the stillness, for even yet she was not satisfied.

'Why did not you kiss me while I slept?' she murmured, and I vow her voice was utterly reproachful. I felt my head swim, being merely flesh and blood; then remembering my mission, with the last strength in me I thrust her from me and arose. I was just in time, too, for barely a moment passed before there came the splash of oars, and almost simultaneously the sound of footfalls rapidly traversing the wharf.

It was the Comte d'Arras, and alone.

- 'Devenac! Devenac!' he called, 'where are you?'
- 'Here I am!' I answered; 'but that's not my title yet.'

He was above me, standing on a packing-case, and so in silhouette against the sky. I saw him start distinctly as if in surprise.

- 'Fool that I am!' he muttered; then more loudly, 'of course not. Is my sister there? Is the boat come yet?'
- 'Your sister is here. I fancy the boat is approaching', I returned. At that instant a light gleamed, and the burly landlord appeared carrying a lanthorn, which he waved in some sort of signal.

Another moment and a ship's boat shot into the rays. A man standing in the bows held some converse with the landlord, who presently came to us.

'Hurry!' he cried. 'You are late already on account of the mist, and Masters is anxious to catch the tide.'

D'Arras hurriedly kissed his sister and handed her into the boat. I stepped in after her and the count stooped down to shake my hand.

The appearance of the man surprised me; his face was very pale, and by the lanthorn rays I saw fresh spilt blood wet upon his sleeve.

'Hullo!' I cried, 'an accident?'

'A little affair,' he muttered, seemingly much disconcerted, but further question on my part was impossible, for the boat sprang away, and a moment after we were in the heart of the mist.

CHAPTER VIII

TRAVELLING WITH CUPID

I CONFESS it. I am very little of a sailor, but that is not all a disadvantage—I have the more admiration for Nelson and other naval heroes on that account. Yet I have never ceased to marvel that men who have defied and mastered all the tricks and perils of that mighty monster the sea should, nevertheless, cut in general but poor figures ashore. There is, for certain, a grand system of compensation lurking somewhere in the matter; and while the sailor men laughed at my bilious face I strove to think philosophies and imagine my tormentors in a stationary drawing-room.

John Masters, or Cock-eye, as I prefer to call him, was all through our voyage confined to his hammock with his wound, and never so much as guessed at my identity. Had he done so, and seen fit to practise his revenge, he would have found me a helpless subject for two days at least. Five days our journey lasted, for soon after we started a gale sprang up and drove the poor *Cuckoo* into the North Sea, a tempestuous region of pestilent fogs and wrecks and great driving mountains of waves.

I had only one small grain of satisfaction in my distress—Mademoiselle d'Arras was, if possible, more ill than me. I am aware that such a confidence displays me in a selfish aspect. But I can afford to be natural. It is impossible for one man to contain all the virtues.

On the third day out the wind changed, and with all possible despatch our course was shifted south again. On the fourth day the waves were not worthy of the name, and I was so far recovered as to look forward to meals which consisted of salted meat and board-like biscuits that smelled of whey and tasted of weevils.

Mademoiselle made her first appearance about dusk, wrapped up to the eyes in furs and furbelows. To my amaze she did not look ill at all, but she was pale, and a little hesitating, a little bashful.

- 'I hope you are quite recovered,' I cried eagerly.
- 'Quite, monsieur; and you?'
- 'Oh,' I observed airily, 'I am splendid. The sea always agrees with me.'
- 'Ah,' she said with a touch of malice, 'I am so glad to hear that, because I was feeling so sorry for you. I saw you from my cabin window and you were so sick.'
 - ' Tu quoque,' I muttered.

But she laughed. 'I have not been ill,' she declared.

'I heard you were, mademoiselle.'

- 'Who could have told you anything so foolish?'
 The little liar!
- 'Mademoiselle used her eyes,' I observed with sarcasm, 'I used my ears.'

She flushed and bit her lip, then laughed merrily, 'We are quits.'

- 'A pretty pair,' said I.
- 'Or one of us?
- 'And the other?'
- 'Good heavens! monsieur, the vainest man alive.'

I bowed to the ground. 'To-morrow, if the wind holds and we meet no English cruiser, we shall be in France.'

Her eyes sparkled. 'I wonder what the Empress is like,' she cried.

- 'You should have opportunity of judging very soon.'
 - 'Oh, how I hope--'
 - 'What, mademoiselle?'
 - 'That she will be nice to me.'
- 'I do not doubt it. She cannot help herself when once she sees you. How I should like to share your triumphs!'

The girl's face clouded, but she said nothing.

'Will you be very glad, mademoiselle, to part from me?'

I tried to see her eyes, but they were turned away.

- 'Not glad,' she murmured.
- 'Nor grieved?' I was feeling sentimental.

- 'Why, yes, monsieur, I shall be quite sorry,' and she glanced at me defiantly.
- 'Mademoiselle does me too much honour, but she is wrong; mademoiselle will forget me in two days in the triumphs awaiting her.'
- 'Two days! That is a very long time,' cooed the girl.
- 'Vixen!' I muttered. Then aloud, 'You are right, Clarisse, I would be a fool to expect so much indulgence from the future Crown Princess of ——'

She stared at me. 'You are mad, monsieur! I

For answer I put abruptly into her hand the letter which I should have returned to her brother but which he had forgotten to demand.

She read as if she could scarce believe her eyes, then stammered indignantly, 'Henri told me nothing of this; it was cruel! it was wrong of him!'

'And yet you perceive that your marriage is arranged. I congratulate mademoiselle on the happiness in store for her.'

But she was in a tempest on instant. 'Stop!' she cried, her eyes flashing fire. 'How dare you, monsieur? I to be bought and sold! It is insolent!' She tore the paper to shreds. 'I swear I shall not be the puppet they think me. I—I—how dare they? I hate them all! They shall see!' She looked so sweet a spitfire as she stamped her foot upon the deck that I could have kissed her to death

in admiration. But I could not forbear to play with her.

'Who knows?' I muttered. 'The prince may be a very charming fellow, you may fall in love with him.'

She gave me a withering glance. 'You know, monsieur—' then stopped abruptly, blushing rose.

- 'What is it that I know, mademoiselle?'
- 'You know me better than that.'
- 'A subterfuge!' I cried. 'Answer me.'
- 'No, no, you—'
- 'I know you are most unkind to me.'
- 'Unkind? I?'
- 'You have charmed the heart out of me, and in return—'
 - 'Well?' she looked at me defiantly.
 - 'You have given me naught but a solitary kiss.'

Her eyes fell in deep confusion, but in a second she muttered, 'If you are good you may have another when you leave me. Indeed, as my brother you have a right. Is it not so?'

- 'You are too good,' I answered gloomily.
- 'Monsieur,' she asked of a sudden, 'do you love me?'

I caught my breath. 'Love you, mademoiselle?' She was staring into the sea. 'Yes, monsieur.'

- 'Look at me,' I commanded.
- 'No.'
- 'Please.'

- 'No, your eyes confuse me; answer me!'
- 'Yes, mademoiselle, I love you.'
- 'Then tell me all about it.'
- 'Ah,' I muttered, 'that is not so easy.'
- 'Tell me all your feelings,' she whispered, and came close to me so that her body all but touched me. I put an arm around her waist, reckless of the presence of the sailor who stood at the wheel.
 - 'Ah, Clarisse,' I cried, 'you are very cruel!'
 - 'Is it so hard, monsieur?'
 - 'If I but knew your heart.'
 - 'First show me yours, monsieur?'
- 'I have it no longer, dear. It has gone from me to your keeping, and there is left nothing in its place but a hungry emptiness which only you can satisfy.'
- 'That is pretty,' observed mademoiselle, with a critical air.
- 'Laugh at me, mademoiselle, I deserve it, being nothing but a weak fool. And yet—and yet—ah, Clarisse, if you but knew!'
 - 'Yes, yes, but then you must tell me!'
- 'When you are near me I am happy, utterly happy. If you are from me, even but for an hour, I am wretched and lonely, longing for I know not what until you come back, and then—'

She moved from me a little. 'Is that all, monsieur? I have heard speeches like that before; when I am with you, you are happy, is that all?'

'Not all, Clarisse!'

'Then tell me,' imperiously, 'when I was in your arms that night you trembled all over—tell me why.'

I shivered. 'It is then you madden me,' I cried. 'I want to kiss you so hard that it—would hurt us both; I want to crush you to death in my arms.'

She was looking at me now, her eyes glowing in the dusk like stars. 'Yes, yes,' she murmured.

- 'Oh, I want you so!' I cried hoarsely.
- 'And is this love?' she asked, all a-tremble. But a gleam of hope shot through me.
- 'You! you!' I demanded hotly. 'Tell me of yourself.'

She swayed towards me. 'You make me feel like that, monsieur.'

For the space of a moment we stared deep into each other's eyes, just a man and a woman with no deceptive mask between us, and yet I, the man, was weak and afraid, longing but not daring to touch her. Then a long sigh came from her lips, and a whisper like a breath of passion. 'I feel like that now, monsieur.'

With an inarticulate cry I caught her in my arms and crushed her in a passionate embrace. I rained kisses on her face, her eyes, her lips—kisses that burned into our very souls and set our hearts on fire.

Her breast heaved, her breath came from her in

low, quick sobs, her lids were half closed, her face was pale as death.

For me I was shaking like a schoolboy at his first kiss of love.

Soon she lay back in my arms and gazed up at me through her heavy-lidded eyes. 'Do not let them take me from you, monsieur,' she whispered; 'keep me always with you. Promise me, monsieur.'

- 'Always, I swear it!' I cried. 'Say you love me, Clarisse.'
 - 'I love you, monsieur.'
 - 'And will you marry me, Clarisse?'

Her eyes closed. 'Ah, yes, marry—marry me now, monsieur,' she murmured low.

I laughed out in pure delight, but next moment muttered jealously, 'What about Josephine and the Crown Prince, Clarisse?'

Like a flash she was away from me, no longer a maid half overcome with passion, but a merry, mocking sprite rippling with laughter.

'Are you not ashamed, monsieur,' she cried, 'to trifle so with the future Crown Princess of ——?'

I was dazed with the suddenness of the change.

- 'You will never set eyes on him,' I growled.
- 'Oh, but I shall!' she cried. 'Who knows, he may be a very charming fellow. I may fall in love with him.'
 - 'Clarisse!' I muttered reproachfully, but she was

gone from me and 1 saw her no more, for the witch locked herself up in her cabin.

Next morning at daylight, without hap or incident, we sailed into the Port of Brest, which we found to be simply crammed with thousands of crafts of all shapes and sizes, from a full-rigged ship to a flat-bottomed punt. They were sure enough there to accommodate half a million of men.

John Masters asked to see me before we left, and little as I liked the encounter I could not well refuse.

He glared at me as though I were the devil at first, and were it not that he was trussed up in bandages I believe he would have attacked me there and then.

However, I soothed his feelings with a handsome gift and the fellow pretended to be satisfied. He informed me that his arrangements were slightly altered. He would not proceed direct to Boulogne but must run back to England first.

He would, however, keep to his agreement, and with all possible haste, his business once over, seek the port fixed on and there await me. He informed me that I should always get earliest news of him at a little inn called the Louis d'Or situated in a street of Boulogne, whose name I forget, and at this place he advised me to stay as it was a smuggler's den and my presence there would not excite remark. I liked the fellow less every

second I spent with him and was glad to get away.

I found Mademoiselle d'Arras already seated in the boat and impatiently awaiting my arrival. She was very merry and excited at the prospect of once more visiting her native soil, a feeling which I must say I did not altogether share, seeing it was a strange land to me and filled with dangers. However I put a good face on the matter and joined in her light-hearted raillery and chatter with a fair assumption of cheerfulness.

The wharves and town were simply alive with soldiers; soldiers in every direction wherever the eye could see, and hundreds of tents were pitched in every street. The place was, in fact, one huge camp.

We found two gens d'armes waiting to receive us, and they examined our passports with grave suspicion, asking us all manner of questions, some of which brought angry blushes to the cheeks of mademoiselle. However, an officer appeared upon the scene after some delay, and at one glance he was satisfied. A very handsome and courteous gentleman he was, who placed himself entirely at our disposal, escorted us to an hotel and made himself in other ways agreeable. Too agreeable to my fancy, for his admiration of mademoiselle's beauty was unmistakable, and she appeared to enjoy it.

In my rôle of brother I hardly dared resent such a trifle, but by the time he left us I was boiling.

'You had better go to your room,' I said sternly to the girl, 'while I go out and see about a diligence.

She pouted and offered me her purse. 'Henri told me to give it you,' she explained, 'it is French money.'

I took it gravely, bowed, led her to her room and was off; but she caught me in the passage. 'You are angry with me, monsieur?' she said pitifully.

'Very, mademoiselle,' I answered.

'I know I was wrong,' she pouted, 'but he was so nice and so handsome; but you need not be jealous, Caryl.'

It was the first time she had used my name, but I did not relent. 'I am not jealous, mademoiselle,' I answered sharply. 'Is that all you have to say?'

'Caryl-dear!'

'Is that all, mademoiselle?'

She drew herself up haughtily.

'Oh, quite, monsieur!' and swept off like a princess.

I was fair mad to run after her, but a fool's pride held me, and I swung off with a black heart for all the jaunty tune I whistled.

It was not long before I had arranged, by paying a sum down, for a coach and pair and relays of horses all the way to Paris. I found my assumed

name and passport acted everywhere like a talisman, and luckily I spoke French so fluently that I was able to carry myself in that detail with ease.

At breakfast mademoiselle was a sheer icicle, and froze all my attempts at reconciliation; moreover, before it was half over the handsome officer of the morning—Lieutenant Lablache he called himself—came into the room and made the astounding announcement that he had been detailed by Marshal Ney's order to escort us to St Cloud with a half company of dragoons.

The news put me out of temper, but mademoiselle made her compliments to the lieutenant with a smile that quite turned the poor fellow's head. Poor fellow, I say, for by that time I half pitied him as I had made up my mind to kill him.

I could see the fellow had half commenced to think me a boor, so to rob him of that impression (I hate to be misapprehended) I forced him to eat with us, and was altogether so condescending that he was soon ready to swear I was the best man in France and possessor of the prettiest sister in the world.

I extracted a good deal of valuable information from him, however, concerning Paris and the Court.

The Court, he informed me, was, so far, a rank failure. It was gorgeous, magnificent and conspicuous enough, but its chiefest stars were soldiers and not courtiers. Certainly not the courtiers

Napoleon craved for. It appeared that the Corsican upstart (whom, by the way, Lablache idolatrously adored) wished less to surround himself with a following of brilliant and talented people than with a bevy of aristocrats. Plenty of foreign nobles thronged his halls. The blue bloods of France, however, held aloof, less, perhaps, out of loyalty to their exiled sovereign than from a feeling of contempt for the new regime and a certain timidity and jealous distrust of each other. They needed a leader of unquestionable rank to set them an example, and Lablache informed me that the Emperor expected great things from my visit. could not help feeling a thrill of exultation as I listened, for surely few men have had such an opportunity as was mine. The way was beset with dangers and difficulties, but dangers are to the brave irresistible attractions, and to the philosophic mind the proper incentives to the prosecution of a task to ultimate success.

Lablache paid my sister many compliments. He assured her that she would create a sensation at Court, that there was no one there to compare with her, and the like. Clarisse accepted his attentions with the savoir faire of an empress, at one time commenting disdainfully, at another reducing him to ecstasy with a kind glance or a dazzling smile. I watched the comedy with a species of grim humour, and once when I caught her eye succeeded in dis-

concerting her for a moment. But she soon recovered and treated me worse than before. When, an hour later, we started on our journey I was hard and cold as stone. I took the lieutenant's horse and, in spite of his half-hearted protestations, insisted he should ride in the carriage with my sister. But an hour of that sickened me. I was filled with a jealous fury, and pleading fatigue changed places with Lablache.

I found my sister feigning to be weary, leaning back among the cushions.

- 'Are you tired?' I asked coldly.
- 'Very,' with a yawn.
- 'A pretty country, this France of yours.' I pointed out the window. She yawned again. 'Lovely weather, isn't it?'
 - 'Clarisse!' I cried sharply.

She sat up startled. 'Monsieur?'

- 'What do you mean by treating me like this?'
- 'Like what?' indifferently.
- 'Don't pretend innocence, mademoiselle,' I growled.
- 'Really, monsieur,' she protested, 'I feel very tired,' and settled herself among her cushions again.

I stared out of the window, furious with rage, for a full half-hour, then, turning cautiously, discovered mademoiselle to be fast asleep. But I had been played with in that fashion before. I stooped over her, and though her eyelids never flickered, the ghost of a smile played round her lips. I pulled down the window-blinds and kissed her roughly on the mouth, more in hate than love; but she gave a shiver and a sigh. 'Ah, make me feel again, monsieur!' she muttered.

My anger faded like a dream and our quarrel spent itself in passionate kisses. So we passed the best part of the day. But when we woke to earth again I warned her: 'Don't play with me any more, Clarisse; if you do, I will not answer for the consequence.'

Her eyes flashed. 'You threaten me, monsieur?'
'No, I warn,' I answered gravely, not liking her tone.

For answer she sprang to the window and stopped the carriage. 'Monsieur Lablache!' she called.

He was before her in an instant, cap in hand.

'Your pleasure, comtesse?'

'My brother is weary of riding with me—brothers so seldom appreciate sisters of their own, monsieur—he wishes to exchange places with you, but he feared to discommode you, although I assured him you would not mind. Was I impertinent, monsieur?'

Lablache poured out a stream of frantic protestations, looking idiotically happy; and I, feeling half dazed at the suddenness of the thing, half amused by the spirit of the witch, and deep in my heart

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a burning fire of anger, nevertheless got out and mounted the lieutenant's horse. Gods! I set them a pace for the rest of that day, and by nightfall had broken three relays of horses. And still I ordered the advance, not even halting for a meal, till by ten, more than half way to Paris, in my own weariness I cried a halt before the sole inn of the little village of ——.

We ate our supper in silence, mademoiselle and I together, for I think from the look of me she dared not ask the lieutenant to join us. I had vowed by this to have done with the girl for ever. She had befooled me-she, a chit of a child fresh from her convent-more than any other woman in my life had done. During my furious ride I had cursed her for a jade, a heartless coquette, faithless and forsworn, until I had almost persuaded myself into believing her a worthless thing. 'Pretty tricks these convents must teach their pupils,' I growled to myself, and recalled all the queer stories I had ever listened to. ''Fore Gad, as Prince George always says, I was as near hating her as I had been any But I schooled myself, laughing living being. my anger, my lack of self-control, to scorn-me, the gambler, the card-turner, to give way like a raw lad!-until I was openly calm and cold for all the blaze within.

Mademoiselle tried several little pretty speeches for my benefit; she had the grace to appear a little ashamed of herself, but I was adamant and rebuffed her so often with stinging coldness that at last she let me severely alone, and affected light-hearted indifference. Immediately after supper she retired to her room, and I was not long in imitating her example. Our rooms adjoined, with a connecting door between, the lock of which was on her side; but in any case she need not have feared, I would not have disturbed her repose for a king's ransom.

I threw myself upon the bed, and such was my weariness that, in spite of my misery, in a few minutes I was in a dreamless sleep.

For hours I slept, it seemed to me, then I awoke with a start, experiencing that strange, intense sense or consciousness which all old campaigners feel when all is not right. I listened with every nerve on tension, but the silence was deadly and the dark profound.

And yet I felt, I knew, that I was not alone in the room. Someone was there—some person who knew that I was aware of his presence, and who preserved silence in imminent fear of discovery.

With deadly swiftness and caution I noiselessly slipped my hand out to find my rapier, which I had left standing unsheathed beside the bed.

To my horror it was gone. I almost cried out at the discovery, and then for moments which seemed hours I lay thinking, waiting, gathering myself together, straining my muscles to make a spring when the moment came.

Suddenly a drop of water splashed upon my forehead. I felt it distinctly, and, to make sure, put up my hand. Yes, my hand was wet. The strain became too much for me. Uttering a hoarse cry I struck out, and, the horror of it! my brutal hand encountered soft, yielding flesh—the flesh of a woman.

I heard a low groan and a soft body sank fainting into my arms.

Half beside myself I sprang up, and laying her gently upon the bed struck a light. It seemed hours before I could get the wretched dip to burn, but at last it flamed.

There, across the coverlid, lay Clarisse, still as marble, her eyes closed, her face pale as death, and beautiful as an angel. For a dreadful moment I thought her really dead, and my heart stood still. But soon she moved and gave a little moan. I sprang towards her and covered her from head to heel with frantic kisses, bitterly cursing myself and imploring her to speak to me. Ah, what a brute I felt! And she, recovering at last, glanced up at me with a tender smile; but then remembering her deshabille, she blushed divinely and drew her laces closely round her.

'Oh, say you are not hurt,' I muttered, weak tears running down my cheeks. 'Ah, God! to think that I have struck you.'

But the woman shone out in Clarisse then as never before, who was most often the child. She took my head in her hands as I knelt beside her, quite overcome, and she kissed me on the forehead. 'Yes, dear,' she whispered, 'you hurt me, it pains me a little yet, but I love the pain since you have caused it.' Then she laughed merrily, 'Did you think me a robber?'

- 'I should have known it was you,' I groaned.
- 'I could not sleep without your kiss,' she muttered reproachfully. 'Oh, monsieur, you were asleep.'
 - 'Monsieur!' I muttered reproachfully too.
 - 'Caryl, then.'
- 'You were very unkind to me, dear,' I said, something of my anger returning, but she stopped me with a kiss.
- 'It was you who was wrong,' she said. 'You ordered me when you should have entreated; you threatened me when you should have implored. Am I not a woman?'
- 'Then, Clarisse,' I cried, 'I entreat you now; for God's sake, dear, never make me jealous again, it was torture.'

She puckered up her brows in a little frown. 'I'm not sure I don't like being ordered best.'

- 'Then,' said I, 'go back to your bed this instant or you'll catch your death of cold.'
- 'It's lonely in there,' she muttered rebelliously as she departed; but I heard her moving about in her

room, and at last I cried out curiously, 'Whatever are you doing, Clarisse?'

- 'I'm getting dressed for the morning.'
- 'Oh!'

Presently the door opened a little and she said, 'Caryl, I'm quite dressed now.'

- 'Well, dear, hadn't you better try to sleep?'
- 'Are you very sleepy, Caryl?'
- 'No, dear, I'm not.'
- 'Because I can't catch cold when I'm quite dressed, can I, mons—Caryl? And I'm not one little bit sleepy.'

This young lady had a trick of making me feel suddenly stupid and helpless. Taking silence for consent she came into my room and sate herself beside me. There we rested hand in hand, silent, and for the most part quite happy, until the candle spluttered and finally went out.

'Now, dear,' I muttered, 'you'd better go to your room and rest.'

But the amazing child, daring to madness in her innocence, absolutely refused. 'I'm so frightened of the dark,' she whispered. Do let me lie down beside you, Caryl, and then I'll be so happy and safe.' Nor did she wait for my consent, but with the utter confidence of her affection and sweet faith in me she curled herself into my arms and presently fell into a peaceful slumber, her head upon my shoulder, her sweet breath fanning my cheek. And I, charmed

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and touched to the bottom of my heart, kept watch and ward, filled with an infinite tenderness for my baby sweetheart, I should like to say till dawn, but the fact is I was very weary, and in five minutes I also was sleeping like a log.

CHAPTER IX

MY FIRST DAY AT ST CLOUD

WHEN we were within a few miles of our destination, Lieutenant Lablache sent a soldier forward to announce our advance, and we found, on entering the gardens of the Court, a guard of honour drawn up to receive us.

Clarisse, during the latter part of our journey, hourly grew more concerned for my safety. As yet I had not thought fit to disclose to her more than a small part of my intentions, and she came to marvel at my cheerfulness and to plan in her childish way all manner of expedients whereby, as soon as possible, I might escape France and return to England. I scarce gave that matter a thought, being well content—like a proper gambler—to enjoy the good of each day and not go out of my way to borrow trouble from the morrow. In any case I had no intention of quitting France without the maid I had grown to love. I swore to that, but I did not tell her so. Time enough, I thought. For the present the situation, with its dazzling chances,

grew each hour more fascinating, more deliciously exciting.

We arrived at St Cloud about eleven o'clock in the forenoon. Savary, master of the household, attired in a brilliant Court uniform, strode down the steps, and opening our carriage door himself assisted Clarisse to alight. Everywhere excited and expectant faces peered at us, and we could judge how much importance the Emperor must attach to our visit from the manner of his servants.

Savary paid us many florid compliments and escorted us within, through lines of servants, who stood at the salute, tricked out in gorgeous livery.

I had previously determined upon my course of action, and in the rôle of a prince of the blood I bore myself with a manner of arrogant indifference. I answered Savary's remarks with haughty curtness, allowing him to perceive that I considered it a condescension to converse with him at all.

The first reception-room we found to be choked with ladies, but on a clear space in the centre stood a stately woman, tall and elegantly robed, alone. I noticed that her cheeks were painted and that her eyes were beautiful, being large, brown and languorous, and I jumped to the conclusion she must be the Empress.

I was right.

Our entrance created a perfect flutter. All the women stared at Clarisse as if stricken dumb and

jealous by her beauty, as indeed they might well have been, for there was scarce a pretty face among the crowd. Then quite a hum, resembling the buzzing of a swarm of bees, broke loose, but the Empress came towards us with graceful, gliding steps. 'Welcome, thrice welcome to France!' she cried, and taking Clarisse in her arms lightly kissed her on both cheeks.

I bowed and coldly kissed the very tips of the fingers she extended to me.

'A thousand thanks, your Majesty,' I said stiffly. 'We are glad to be upon French soil again.'

'Ah,' cried the Empress, archly, 'France has been desolate without you, comte! But I can see that this sweet child is weary; doubtless you too, monsieur, would be glad of a rest. His Majesty is filled with anxiety to see you, but he is at present attending to matters of State.'

I bowed. 'Then with your Majesty's permission I shall retire,' and I exchanged a meaning glance with Clarisse, who departed on Josephine's arm.

Savary led me to the apartments which had been set aside for my use, and he informed me en route that three lackeys had been assigned to my especial service. Never had I seen more beautiful rooms. The first was draped with rich golden hangings, and the furniture, of magnificent design and workmanship, was heavily gilt throughout. The second was a dressing-room fit for a king. Huge mirrors

were let into the walls on every side. Massive bronze chandeliers swung from the ceiling. Carpets of softest velvet-pile covered the floor, and on a table carved with all the wealth of detail of Venetian art reposed treasures of essences, scents and all manner of cosmetics. But if the other rooms were beautiful the bedchamber was of a splendour almost indescribable. The walls were painted rose, and a soft, liquid tint of that exquisite colour which I have never since seen equalled. Light streamed through small stained glass panes of crimson and amber; the doors were draped from floor to ceiling with fine silken curtains lavishly enriched with embroidered violets. Each chair was a veritable throne, and each of itself a triumph of the carver's art; while the bed, a monstrous four-poster, was superbly wrought into the presentment of four crouching, mouthing lions, startlingly life-like and hideous.

I sat down sheer dazed, for the magnificence weighed upon my nerves; and there entered my mind this uncomfortable reflection,—

'This Corsican, who goes to such pains to welcome me and provide for my comfort, will he not take some trouble also to retain me under his control?'

I had scarcely rested a moment before a lackey ushered to my presence an obsequious visitor, who proved to be a tailor. He had received orders to wait upon me and supply me with the proper Court costume before noon! My head fairly swam under such attentions. It appeared that the tailor had been already supplied with a hint as to my proportions (luckily D'Arras was tall for a Frenchman), and the clothes were even then almost completed. When he had left I threw myself upon the bed and tried to think on the matter clearly; but the more I thought the more confused I became, so finally, with an oath of resignation, I composed myself to sleep.

Two lackeys woke me—one a tall, grim-visaged fellow with a dark and Eastern cast of features; the other a little dapper Frenchman with long, greasy hair. The latter spoke. 'His Majesty has sent his compliments, and bids me say he waits anxiously to receive you.'

I sprang up, and they proceeded first to disrobe me and then to deck me in the Court costume which had already arrived, complete in every detail. During the process I found that one of my lackeys was named Roustan, that he was a Mameluke, dumb, and the Emperor's own special attendant. Such compliments quite embarrassed me — the Emperor's own attendant!

I surveyed myself before a mirror and could scarce suppress a cry of admiration. The costume was simply magnificent, but it was designed less to adorn than to display, so I was delighted to

find that I appeared even superior to the costume. My coat was of fine white silk, richly embroidered with gold and real jewels; my doublet and knickers were of dazzling satin; my stockings of gleaming pearl; my shoes black, high - heeled and golden-buckled. I had never beheld myself so completely attired to my own satisfaction, and without vanity I declare that I looked a prince from crown to sole. The knowledge gave me confidence, and I followed Roustan, feeling proud and insolent, although about to meet and be subjected to the criticism of the keenest eyes and brightest intellect this world has ever produced.

At the door of the Emperor's ante-room, which was filled with half a score of gentlemen attired similarly to myself, some of whom I recognised from fanciful descriptions of their persons which had trickled into England, I was met by a young gentleman who hastily introduced himself.

'I am the Comte de Ségur, prince,' he whispered, 'and delighted to welcome you to France, but His Majesty awaits you.' The young count possessed a pair of bright and exceedingly intelligent eyes, and while not strictly handsome, was of such a frank countenance and taking manners that I conceived an instant fancy for him. I followed him to the door of an inner chamber, which he opened, and after announcing my name in a low voice, made way for me to pass and instantly closed the door behind me,

Thus I came face to face with Napoleon Buonaparte, one time a Corsican noble, later a lieutenant of Artillery, now master of half Europe and the most powerful man in the civilised world.

The room in which I found myself was spacious and lofty, and yet barely, indeed almost poorly, The windows were hung with cheap furnished. chintz curtains; a small patch of the floor was covered with a threadbare carpet. A large, old-fashioned desk-table took up the centre of the room, and for other furniture the whole apartment could boast but three plain wooden chairs. The only ornaments visible were five fine oil paintings hung with mathematical attention to preciseness on the walls. I took all these things in at a glance, then turned to greet this strange man, who for the comfort of his guests was extravagantly munificent, and yet was for himself satisfied with a simplicity no garret could surpass.

He was quite alone. He was attired in that dress which he always affected, and which has become so notorious as to be unnecessary for me to describe. I noted in a flash that he was short and somewhat potbellied, that his calves were well turned; his arms were slightly extended as if in welcome. Then I met his eyes and was instantly lost to all else. Men have told me that Napoleon was slightly bald, that his nose was shapely and strength, that his mouth was a miracle of beauty and strength, his chin

predominant. It may be so, I believe, but cannot distinctly remember any of these things, for always my powers of observation have stopped short at his eyes. Large, deep, liquid orbs they were, with a singularly fascinating and compelling quality lurking in their violet depths. I thought them steel-grey when he first bent his gaze upon me in a glance which I fancy sought to measure my disposition. But as he gazed their aspect grew mild and their colour deepened into a wonderful and splendid violet. A smile further softened the iron hardness of his face, and presently he spoke out in a merry, frank fashion which quite won my regard.

'Diantre!' he cried, 'they told me you were a conspirator, a man of mature years, of wonderful cunning and cowardice! What age are you, lad?'

I remembered that D'Arras was an older man than I and replied at hazard, 'Forty-four, sire.'

He advanced and put his hand upon my shoulder.

'So much! Come,' he said, 'take that chair, I foresee that we shall be friends.'

He himself took and sat astride a chair before me, his strange eyes always fastened on my face. I admit I grew, with the passing of each moment, to like him more and more, but I remembered my rôle, and that I must appear reserved and stiff.

'You are very good, sire,' I muttered coldly.

He frowned. 'I hope your apartments are com-

fortable,' he said, in a different and harsher voice than he had yet used.

'Quite, sire,' stiffly.

'So! And nothing was amiss in your reception?'

'Nothing, sire,' still more stiffly.

He rose abruptly. 'Diantre! what ails you, man?' he cried in a sudden rage. 'Is it the question of your sister? The Crown Prince is on his way here. He will arrive to-morrow; the marriage will take place the day after. What more can I do?' His eyes fairly shot fire at me.

Such an extraordinary change to take place in a second of time quite astonished me; the Emperor's eyes were now steel-grey again and they regarded me with all the menace of drawn swords. It was no part of my plan to arouse Napoleon's enmity, and yet that he was very angry was quite certain. I afterwards learned that nothing excited him so much as opposition; he hated not to conquer at once. Delay of any kind was odious to his nature.

I was, however, equal to the emergency.

I gave him stare for stare and answered in a voice which conveyed a sense of irreparable injury sustained,—

'You might give me something to eat, sire; I've tasted nothing since daylight.'

He flashed at me a burning glance, but finding my features imperturbable, presently broke into a roar of laughter.

'Good!' he cried, 'you shall lunch with me. Ali!' A tall soldier, the very counterpart of Roustan, my Mameluke, glided into the room.

'Bring us something to eat here, immediately.'

The man saluted, departed, but like magic returned bearing with him a tray containing two fowls roasted whole, some plates, knives, forks, glasses and a wicker-covered flask of light Italian wine.

The Emperor seated himself at the desk, dismissed Ali with a curt nod, and invited me to join him.

He helped himself first, then pushed the tray to me, and, nothing loth, I commenced to eat a hearty meal.

Napoleon seemed wrapped in thought and ate but little.

Now and then he addressed to me quick, curt questions all having reference to England.

- 'Is it true that Nelson is in the Mediterranean?'
- 'Rather on the coast of Spain, sire, watching Villeneuve.'
 - 'Ah, that man!' he growled, and was silent.

Presently again,—

- 'Sir Sydney Smith—is where?'
- 'Engaging Verhuel off Ostend, sire, I believe.'
- 'Verhuel will beat him.'
- 'I hope so, sire,' and drank a bumper of the wine, which I found excellent.
 - 'Where is Cornwallis?' he suddenly demanded.

- 'Somewhere in the Channel, sire.'
- 'Do you know his strength?'
- 'I have heard it said fifty ships of the line.'
- 'Wrong! He has but eighteen!' he shouted, glaring at me savagely.

But I met his glance with calm insouciance.

'I may have been misinformed, sire; those English are great braggarts.'

'True,' and he relapsed into meditation. Soon he started muttering rapidly to himself, having, I verily believe, quite forgotten my existence. 'If Villeneuve were Gantheaume I would be sure, but even so he can't fail me now. He must beat Calder or evade him, and then with his forty ships raise the blockade of Brest. That would give us sixty-one ships to hold the Channel—for a week. I want no more.'

I listened breathlessly, but was careful not to appear too deeply interested.

Napoleon thumped the table with his fist.

'For five hundred years the English have been masters of the universe. We shall in one week—I want no more, one week—put them back into their proper places. They conquered France under an idiot king; we shall conquer England under a demented one!'

'Where do you propose to land your forces, sire?' I asked the question with affected indifference, but a beating heart.

He gazed at me with a far-away look. 'From the flotillas now waiting to embark at Boulogne and Brest we shall land on the shores of Kent and Sussex, whence we shall spring on London. The expedition of Texel will sail up the Thames, Verhuel will see to that; the nature of my plan is so good that, in spite of all possible obstacles, every chance is in my favour.'

Verily I agreed with him, but I perceived the weak spot in his design. For all this he depended upon Admiral Villeneuve, who was then lingering to refit at Vigo, after an engagement with Calder, who had taken two of his ships off Cape Finisterre.

If Villeneuve could be by any means delayed or beaten, the invasion of England so near at hand, so masterfully conceived and planned to its last detail, must necessarily fail, for already Pitt had been preparing a diversion on the Continent. Russia had signed an agreement. Austria, who had long been amassing thousands of troops, only waited the signal to launch her battalions against the army of the Rhine; while even Germany was making mighty preparations for war.

I longed for wings wherewith to fly to England and whisper what I had heard into the ears of Pitt; I saw I could not afford to linger long in France, and from that moment I thought of escape, for already my excursion into the heart of this hostile land had been more than justified, and I knew well

that Pitt would have given his right hand to learn Napoleon's plans.

My reflections were disturbed by the Emperor, who still muttered to himself, but I could no longer catch the drift of his distracted murmurings.

By this I had finished my meal, and now leaned back in my chair speculating on the thoughts of this strange little man who held the fate of nations in his grasp. He still stared at me, but his gaze was unseeing—that of a visionary or a dreamer whose prophetic glance sought to penetrate the future through the walls of the present. I did not choose to disturb his dreaming, and heaven knows how long he might have continued were it not for De Ségur, who entered and said,—

'Marshal Duroc craves audience, sire; he has been waiting these two hours!'

Napoleon sprang to his feet.

'Admit him, Ségur, but first let me make known to you the Comte d'Arras, whom I give into your charge. Be his mentor, Ségur; take good care of monsieur's comfort and see that he wants for nothing. I relieve you from further duty to-day, Ségur.'

'Thanks, sire!' The aide-de-camp saluted respectfully, and I also nodded and prepared to depart, but the Emperor stopped me.

'Is there anything you would say?' he demanded.

'There are certain other promises, sire, that you

have made me,' I muttered, making a bold guess in this matter, for I conceived that D'Arras had not acquainted me of all his negotiations with Napoleon.

But the Emperor gave a black frown. 'First let the marriage take place,' he answered with much harshness. 'Let me tell you, count, I would have been better pleased had you asked for military preferment, as I suggested.'

'Each man to his taste,' I muttered, wondering what the devil D'Arras had actually demanded.

'Well, well,' he cried, 'you have my word, go!' and he actually stamped his foot.

I lost no time, but departed with De Ségur, well pleased to have got through the ordeal so well and without apparently having aroused a single suspicion as to my identity.

Arrived at my rooms again I found there three letters awaiting me, all of course addressed to D'Arras.

Begging Ségur to excuse me, I opened them. The first one was from Clarisse, it ran:—

'The Empress informs me that the Emperor has decreed that I shall be married on the day after to-morrow to a man I have never met. For God's sake, my brother, let me see you without delay!

'CLARISSE'

The second was from a woman evidently not unknown to the real D'Arras. It ran:—

'Ah, mon chèri, with what infinite happiness I have heard the news of your return! Need I say with what loving hopes I await the time when once more I shall be locked in your dear arms. Do not keep me waiting too long, Henri. You will find nothing is changed, save that the kitten you used to love so well has grown big and sleek, and is the mother of a large and thriving family. Ah! mon Dieu, I cannot see to write for tears — tears of happiness. Come to me, Henri, come quickly!

'AMÉLIE.'

The note bore no address of the sender and was undated.

I gave a low whistle of surprise, reflecting rather concernedly that with my change of personality I had assumed undreamed-of responsibilities. It made me half regretful that my time in France was limited, for Amélie's letter pleased me very much. I pictured her as a slight, tender little girl with big eyes and a big heart, then turned with a sigh to the third missive.

This last was addressed in bold, dashing characters—the proper handwriting of a soldier. As I read I almost groaned. Truly, more burdens fell on me each moment.

'MONSIEUR'—said this letter,—'you will not know me, but you will doubtless remember my sister, Constance Drusart. It may or may not surprise you to learn that your cowardly desertion of her at the time of a woman's greatest need left her without the means to live. She and her babe died of starvation, and their death lies at your door! I have sworn to avenge them. My seconds will wait upon you without delay. Should you refuse me satisfaction (forgive me for the doubt, but you are reputed a coward), I shall pull your nose to-night, or whenever I see you, if it be in the presence of the Emperor himself.

'JEAN DRUSART,
'Colonel, 15me Régiment.

There was no mistaking the meaning of this epistle. It was direct and straightforward, the message of a brave man and a clear thinker.

I commenced to perceive that D'Arras must have been an infernal villain, but my meditation was interrupted by the greasy-headed lackey, François.

'Monsieur the Colonel Vidant and Monsieur the Capitaine Marcelle wish to pay you their respects, monseigneur.'

'Ask them to wait, François.' I turned to De Ségur, who had been amusing himself by looking out the window. 'My dear Comte De Ségur, I am about to ask you a great favour.'

He swung around briskly.

'Whatever I can do, command,' he answered.

'Ah, well, the fact is, an old quarrel has cropped up which must be settled. Colonel Drusart—'

Ségur gave a start. 'Colonel Drusart!' he cried.

- 'Yes, my friend, Colonel Drusart. He has sent me a challenge, and his seconds, I fancy, are now waiting in the next room.'
 - 'You wish me to act for you, monseigneur?'
 - 'Precisely.'
- 'I shall be charmed, monseigneur. But Colonel Drusart!'
- 'What is there surprising in that name, my friend?'
- 'Nothing, count, nothing. At least—he fences well. It is not long since he killed poor old Truçon, the *maître d'armes* of my old regiment the Huitième Chasseurs. But then, as the challenged, you have the choice of weapons. I should tell you Drusart has no name as a pistol shot.'

I yawned with much indifference. 'I prefer swords,' I said. 'They make less noise, and in the end are less bother. Let it be swords, mon ami.'

- 'I shall have to arrange for another second,' said the count. 'I am sure that Lavallais will oblige, if you have no objection.'
 - 'You increase my debt of gratitude,' I murmured.

'Only, for my sake, try and have the meeting take place to-morrow morning. I hate to let these matters linger on indefinitely.'

Ségur looked astonished, but he nodded, and went out to the officers who had come to call upon me. In a few minutes he returned with the information that the duel would take place on the morrow at daylight, in a glade of the woods surrounding St Cloud. We conversed thereafter for a while on divers topics, from which, however, I managed to obtain a good deal of useful information. For instance, the fact that Napoleon was secretly preparing to invade Austria, that he was on the eve of making a fresh levy of sixty thousand men. That the army of invasion then waiting to embark for England at Boulogne consisted of one hundred and sixty thousand; at Brest fifty thousand and Texel thirty-five thousand. That he had lately had a bitter quarrel with Talleyrand. That Décres was in bad odour at Court, owing to the vacillating character of the operations of his protégé, Admiral Villeneuve. That to prevent war with Germany, Marshal Duroc had been despatched to Frederic to give up Hanover to him in exchange for an offensive and defensive alliance. That a powerful French army was assembled on the Rhine and in Italy in order to hold Austria in check, pending the forthcoming campaign and the invasion of England.

Every fresh detail that I gleaned more thoroughly convinced me of the marvellous energy and genius of this Corsican adventurer. He appeared to have provided for every turn of Fortune's wheel. delighted to call himself 'the Man of Destiny,' but, as a matter of fact, he left nothing to chance; he allowed fate no opportunity to assist him, but arranged everything himself. After an hour's chat I consulted with De Ségur on the best means of obtaining some private converse with my sister. but he informed me that such a meeting would be impossible before a late hour-indeed, until the Empress had retired, as Clarisse had been appointed an extraordinary maid of honour to Her Majesty, and this was her first day at Court He, however, promised to assist me, and was kind enough in this purpose to make me acquainted with Madame Julien, the keeper of Her Majesty's wardrobe, a kind lady, who for a substantial consideration agreed to bring Clarisse to visit me that very evening.

About four in the afternoon I attended the Emperor's public reception, and there met many distinguished generals—Rapp, Berthier, Lannes, Dupont, Klein and others. Also men of even greater moment in a more peaceful sphere.

They one and all greeted me with the greatest courtesy and friendliness. Napoleon was, if possible, a little too extravagant in his attentions. He kept me constantly at his side and often leaned upon my arm.

Most of the great soldiers were men of neither breeding nor education. Rough, uncouth fellows who committed faux pas at every step. Lannes was constantly swearing, Rapp had the manners of a cowherd, and Klein spat upon the floor every time he cleared his throat. With one or two exceptions, such as De Ségur or Lavallais, there was not an aristocrat present, a fact which I was very pleased to note, as I feared above all things recognition, or rather non-recognition, by someone who had personally known the real Count D'Arras.

I saw Clarisse several times at a distance, but beyond the exchange of glances was unable to hold any communication with her. She appeared to be anxious and unhappy, poor child, but looked very beautiful, and excited a great deal of attention; more so than Josephine fancied altogether, I thought, for the Creole was of a jealous disposition, and I plainly saw she loved to monopolise the thoughts and attentions of every man about her.

Altogether the *levée* was a dreary function and I was pleased when it was over. Napoleon, on departing, invited me to sup with him, and then, without excuse, promptly ate his words, so De Ségur and I dined *tête-à-tête*.

In the early evening we walked in the beautiful

gardens of St Cloud. Later we were summoned by the Empress and played cards in her apartments.

I won four hundred louis at écarté from De Ségur, and lost three hundred to Marshal Dupont at bezique. He was highly delighted at his success, and I was just as pleased, for I only allowed him to win in order to obtain a little information. By deft questionings I learned a good deal about the system of smuggling then carried on by means of the little cutters, sloops and fishing-smacks that plied unceasingly between England and France. It appeared that a regular fleet of these smugglers constantly ran the blockade and passed from the southern ports of England to Boulogne or Brest almost without question, carrying from England coffee, sugar and spices; from France brandy and wines. The English navy winked at their practices on account of the information which the masters of these vessels could supply (generally false) of the movements and projected movements of the While the French openly encour-French fleet. aged the traffic, as only by these means were they able (and even then at fabulous prices) to acquire those luxuries such as coffee, tea and tobacco which the rigid blockade of their ports by the English rendered impossible to obtain elsewhere.

This news gave me a little hope for the future,

but I was not fool enough to deceive myself and hope too much. With the passing of every hour my task appeared more difficult. Here was I landed in the heart of a hostile country, a selfconstituted spy, engaged in mercilessly tricking the greatest man on earth, becoming every moment more involved in peril, every moment more in danger of detection; and moreover, I was unable to conceal from myself the horrid fact that detection would mean nothing but a most shameful and disgraceful death. In two days my sweetheart was engaged to espouse a powerful prince. matters looked very black; the Fates seemed very much averse to me. All the more need, I reflected, that I should face destiny with an unclouded visage. Other men had won from even more dangerous entanglements without mishap. Why should not I? I had fallen into a grave mood. This, with an effort, I presently shook off, and surprised my companions with a display of excessive goodhumour. I amused the Empress by reciting a more or less imaginary account of our adventures since leaving England. I recounted a score of anecdotes concerning celebrated Englishmen, holding them up in each case to the derision of the company.

The Empress laughed and applauded; Napoleon himself entering silently listened, smiling grimly to himself, and once when I had particularly libelled Pitt over an imaginary horse-dealing transaction, in which I made England's Prime Minister figure as a shrewd man of business completely lacking in all notions of honour, commercial or otherwise, he gave a long hiss of contempt.

- 'S-s-s-s,' he muttered. 'If I were rich enough there were no need to conquer England.'
 - 'Sire?' stammered Rapp.
- 'I should buy it,' sneered the Emperor. 'There is not a man in England can resist a bargain.'

I felt that I could cheerfully have run my sword through his heart, but for all that I laughed louder than the rest.

- 'You are right, sire!' I cried. 'And if they have not already offered their country for sale—'
- 'It is,' interrupted Napoleon, 'because they know I will not buy what I can take,' and he strode off amidst a perfect storm of applause.'

Soon afterwards the Empress retired, and I also; but not for another hour did Clarisse visit me.

- 'How gay you were!' she murmured reproachfully, 'and my heart was like lead.'
- 'My dear child,' I answered gravely, 'the only time that one can afford to appear miserable is when the mind is entirely at ease; I have been troubled, therefore I was gay.'
 - 'Ah! you are laughing at me, Caryl.'
- 'On the contrary, dear, I was never more serious.'

The girl wrung her hands. 'Oh, mon Dieu!' she cried, 'whatever will become of you? And me! my fate is horrible—to be married to a man I have never seen. But you! Oh, heaven, Caryl! soon you will be detected, soon; and they will kill you, and it will be all through me! Mon Dieu! mon Dieu!' The tears were streaming down her cheeks.

I took her gently in my arms and kissed away her tears, then when she was more composed I asked gravely,—

- 'You truly love me, little one?'
- 'You ask that?' she muttered, and gave me a glance that fired my blood, but I sternly repressed myself.
- 'Well, dear, would you be content with me for a husband?'
 - 'Ah, but that is impossible, impossible!'
- 'Nevertheless, would you be content, little one, were it possible?'

She hid her face in my shoulder. 'I love you, monsieur,' she whispered.

But I forced her to look at me.

- 'You say so, baby; then will you risk something for my sake?'
 - 'Anything,' she answered bravely.
 - 'Will you leave France with me, baby?'
- 'Ah, yes! now, at once, Caryl, anything, only let me be always with you. Let us start now.'

- 'Not yet, baby, but promise me something.'
- 'Yes, monsieur.'

'It is to do everything and anything that I may tell you, at any time, no matter how strange my request may seem. Will you promise this, dear?'

She gave me a look of tender confidence which touched me to the heart. 'Gladly, monsieur. What you tell me to do, I shall do; is that right?'

'Quite right, baby; but go now, dear, for I must think. Rest satisfied, my sweetheart; trust all to me, everything will be well.'

She looked shyly up at me. 'Caryl,' she whispered, 'will you tell me one thing!? Why did you bring me to France? You knew that this marriage was arranged for me—if you loved me, why did you let me come?'

The question staggered me. 'I did not know how much I loved you until it was too late. But would you'—I stammered—'would you have gone with me—married me before?'

She looked me gravely, honestly in the eyes, and in that sweet regard the child faded into the woman.

'Yes, dear,' she answered simply, 'I was yours from that first day—yours to do with as you would.'

I am afraid I cursed myself for a fool, cursed everything—my ambition, even my country, which I was trying to serve in this mad expedition—for I saw I had jeopardised the happiness of the sweetest being in the world. Kneeling down, I kissed her hand in very humble self-abasement, and kneeling there I vowed to do all that a man might do to serve her, and I think I addressed a little prayer to the Omnipotent to help me in my vow. I think, I say, for I was never a very reverent man, but there are times when the greatest unbeliever feels the need of divine assistance and ardently wishes that the good God might help him to his desire, however deep his disbelief on other occasions.

But Clarisse would not have me kneel long before her; she wanted, sweet soul, my kisses, and I was not the man to disappoint her. Subsequently we arranged that she should visit me in the same manner and hour on the morrow, and Madame Julien's pocket became in consequence the richer by another hundred louis.

When I had thought her gone Clarisse flashed back to me.

'What is it?' I muttered, seeing in her face a touch of coquetry.

'There is something I thought I ought to tell you,' she whispered. 'The Empress says that the Crown Prince is a very handsome man, and dark. I love dark men!' And she vanished into the corridor before I could move to stay her.

That night was one of the most wretched I have

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ever spent, full of black thoughts and discontented musings, and not till near morning did I really sleep. Ugh! such horrible dreams I had; it were better that I had remained awake. First there was a ghostly firing-party, then a sea trip in which I was horribly ill—although a corpse. Lastly I was toiling up a mountain with Madame Julien (a very fat hag and ugly) firmly astride my shoulders. At the top, Satan, a big black ape, with horns but no tail, dug me in the ribs with a pitchfork. I opened my eyes, but it was only De Ségur prodding my side with his fist.

'It wants but an hour to daylight,' he said gravely. I had completely forgotten the matter of the duel.

CHAPTER X

A BARGAIN FOR THE CROWN OF ENGLAND

DE SÉGUR, while I dressed, occupied himself in endeavouring to inspire me with an awesome idea of the colonel's play. One item indeed gave me some discomfort; it transpired that Drusart was lefthanded, and a left-handed swordsman has always been to me a disconcerting phenomenon.

Ségur declared, moreover, that the colonel's adversaries were usually blinded in one eye before their death came, for which hint I was grateful. Turning the converse presently I questioned him as to the odour in which I was held by the few aristocrats left in France. At first he was disposed to be reserved, but finally confessed that after I had deserted General Pichegru in his hour of need my courage was not held in very high esteem. Now I wanted Ségur's good opinion; why, I don't in the least know, except that I had taken a fancy to the count; at anyrate I spun him a story which would have excused Satan under the circumstances, let alone the real D'Arras, whom I was now believing quite a paltry kind of devil; and by the time it was done

and I dressed, I had won his sympathy and we were the best friends in the world.

We arrived a little late at the place of meeting, for Lavallais kept us waiting, being a heavy sleeper; but our excuses were accepted, and without much delay Drusart and I were placed face to face. I was disappointed with his appearance, for Ségur had told me he was a man of brains and much engineering skill—in fact, that Napoleon placed great confidence in his counsels and intended to rapidly advance him during the next campaign. The man was short and bull-necked, with a very small head and beady, twinkling eyes; moreover, his manners were decidedly gauche and boorish. To my courtly bow he returned a coarse, insolent stare which disgusted me.

I had thought very little about the upshot of the encounter, but now when the point came I determined if possible to kill him; it would mean, at all events, one enemy less for England to fight, and whatever the reason, or lack of reason, for our meeting I could not forget he was my country's enemy.

We stood in one of the prettiest spots in the world, a broad, green-swarded glade planted like a gem in the heart of the woods. The ground was amply carpeted with soft and springing verdure, and the grass glittering with dew looked like a floor-cloth sewn with emeralds. The sun had barely risen

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and just touched with silver the tops of the trees about us, making the scene a veritable fairyland of beauty. When my time comes I hope to rest in just some such spot, so that it be in England. God grant I die in England!

The swords were put into our hands and gravely we saluted, then crossed blades with a clang. Of a sudden an old trick of fence occurred to me; I made a pass and sprang back, my sword up-raised. Drusart fell into the trap and thrust at my thigh. With a sweeping stroke I drove downwards, and as his weapon was held but by the finger-tips in giving point, I had disarmed him in the twinkling of an eye. The whole matter occupied two seconds, if that, and I, the only one not surprised, with my foot on his blade, stood smiling and unconcerned amidst a buzz of exclamations.

I gave him an honourable chance to withdraw, a chance for his life. 'Are you satisfied, monsieur?' I asked politely. But he faced me with blazing eyes.

'This matter is to the death,' he cried; 'you must kill me, or I you.'

'Your life is at my mercy,' I observed.

'Then take it, here is my breast,' and he tore open his shirt.

I stepped back with a shrug of disdain. 'At least die sword in hand,' I said.

He picked up his weapon, red with rage, and once more the blades crossed. But he was a pretty fencer, almost as good as I, and for long he not alone offered me no further chance, but only the memory of Ségur's warning twice saved my life. He had a trick of feinting low, parrying wide and returning a marvellously swift riposte aimed at the face of his opponent, and the very parry to his thrust assisted his intention, for his wrist was like steel and his blade twice slipped on mine, and I was saved by but a hair's-breadth. For ten minutes he compelled me to fight on the defensive, and in that time he had pricked me twice; once on the forehead, a mere graze, and again in the left forearm, but that severely, for I felt the blood dripping to the turf in a perfect stream. Fearing then to lose strength I put forth every effort and soon forced him to give ground, though fighting step by step. My iron muscles in the end prevailed. I felt weakness creeping on and put my life into one desperate rally. His defence was near perfect, but I was the taller and he by no means my equal in mere physical power. Twice I beat down his guard; twice he saved himself by a backward spring. I followed, remorseless as death, and the third time his foot slipped and he fell, but my life hung in the balance and I did not spare him. Driving my sword through his heart I stood for a moment above him, while the world swung round me slowly at first, then faster, faster, black and ever blacker, and at last I fell upon his stiffening body in a deathlike swoon.

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When I awoke to consciousness it was with an unaccustomed sense of weakness, to find myself in my bedroom of the palace, my arm bandaged, and, above all, the Emperor pacing the apartment in unrestrained impatience.

At the sigh I gave he was beside me in a moment.

- 'Ha! you are better?' he cried.
- 'Yes, sire.' I raised myself with difficulty.
- 'So, not two days in France and you have already killed my best engineer, the man whom I had promised should win his baton in England. What have you to say?'

I stammered, 'I am very sorry, sire, but it was my life or his and I have no wish to die.'

- 'Had I known,' he growled, 'I would have placed you both under arrest. Ségur should have told me.'
- 'It is not Ségur's fault,' I cried, concerned lest my friend should be punished. 'I bound him on oath.'
- 'H'm!' Napoleon waved his hands as if to dismiss the subject, then curtly bade my attendants go.

Once alone he turned to me with much sternness. 'I have received dispatches from England,' he announced.

I felt my blood run cold in utter fear that I was at last detected. I was unable to say a word or move.

'Why have you kept your movements secret from De Sevringen?' he demanded.

The question gave me a hope; evidently his despatches were imperfect. 'The fact is, sire,' I stammered, 'the marquis is anxious to marry my sister.'

'Ah!' He bent upon me a cold, searching glance, which gradually changed to one of scorn, then he sneered,—'You have, or perhaps your sister, allowed De Sevringen to hope?'

I flushed hotly under his gaze. 'My sister has not,' I muttered.

'Melville is playing with us,' cried Napoleon, abruptly changing the subject. 'The cursed swine seems to think he can afford himself such an amusement.'

'What has he done?' I muttered, fighting hard to restrain my excitement.

'Read!' said the Emperor, and thrust a sheet of paper into my hands. It contained a few lines of cipher, translated beneath, in a handwriting unknown and yet strangely familiar to me. It was, in fact, that of Napoleon himself.

'D'Avias still hesitates. Melville demands fifty thousand pounds, which he needs to replace stolen public funds. Promises in exchange to send Nelson to the East, but refuses to give security. Please instruct; fear untrustworthy. Garrett advises English

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victory off Finisterre, but admits Calder in full retreat, Villeneuve pursuing towards Channel. Nelson has left Madeira and proceeds at full speed towards Cadiz. Pitt's emissaries, Vienna, Moscow, Berlin, well received. Advise early move. England expects your troops to land between Portsmouth and Dover. Friends all anxiously expecting you.'

I handed the papers back to the Emperor, although I would have more cheerfully parted with the hand which offered it to him.

He rolled it in a ball and threw it into the heart of the fire, an action which made me sick with disappointment.

'This Melville,' he stormed, pacing up and down, 'you know him?'

'Yes, sire, a scoundrel of a bad type, and much discredited, but for some secret reason he sways Pitt always to his wishes. He has more influence, in spite of his impeachment, than any man in England.'

Napoleon halted, and abruptly facing me, demanded, 'What shall I do?'

I stood up in a flush of excitement. 'You permit me to advise you, sire?'

'Speak!'

'His wife is my friend,' I muttered (the lie near choked me). 'I know him through and through. Some time ago, to serve me, I was hard pressed, she stole some of his papers, and their absence

forced him to assist me. Those very papers, by my direction, she still holds—'

'Well, well,' interrupted the Emperor, impatiently.

'Bear with me a moment, sire! I must now speak of Sevringen; a few days before I left England he was publicly discredited. He fought a duel before the Prince of Wales himself with a young devil named Franks, an officer of Hussars. Franks disarmed him, forced him to disrobe and proved him to wear a shirt of mail.'

'What, a coward?' thundered Napoleon.

'Even so, sire, and thus you may guess he no longer retains the respect of your party. Interest alone keeps that party together.'

'This is true?' shouted the Emperor, his face black as night.

'Before God, sire!'

His glance scorched me but I never flinched.

'What is it that you propose?' he demanded suddenly.

Calm as glass I faced him. 'My absence from England is not yet known. I doubt if even De Sevringen is aware of it. Send me back with full powers, sire, and the day after I land I stake my life that orders will be despatched to send Nelson to the East Indies.'

'H'm!' said Napoleon, reflectively. 'You want me to recall De Sevringen.'

I bowed, and resumed quickly, 'That is not all

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my plan. I have thought the matter out in full. It may be true, as the marquis says, that England expects you to land your troops on the south coast; but Pitt is wide awake and wise. It were better that he should be made sure. In a week's time Villeneuve should be at the mouth of the Channel. If a cruiser—your largest, sire—were dispatched to meet him, containing your commands to hurry on, in which you might incidentally mention that it is your intention to land near Portsmouth, or say somewhere in Essex, immediately he has raised the blockade. And if, sire, that cruiser were captured, after a desperate fight, sire—but mark me, captured—why, then, Pitt would believe.'

'My largest cruiser,' repeated Napoleon, doubt-fully.

'The English are cunning, sire; were the message captured in a less—' I shrugged my shoulders.

The Emperor patted me upon the back.

'It is a good plan,' he said cheerily, 'and, my dear count, if it were carried out—successfully carried out—my debt to you would be large.'

'You could easily pay it, sire,' I muttered, or rather stuttered, for I was wondering what the devil I should ask.

'Well,' he said, 'but how?'

An inspiration came to me. 'The throne of England will soon be vacant, sire,' I said boldly.

Napoleon roared with laughter, and I could see

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with half an eye was mightily delighted. He slapped his hand upon his thigh and shouted out a string of strange, outlandish exclamations. Presently, with tears in his eyes—tears of mirth—he turned to me and said, 'You are not very modest, count; besides, we do not think of giving England a king. A governor would be sufficient.'

I affected keen disappointment. 'A governor,' I protested. 'Believe me, sire, England will never rest quiet without a king. I would be your vassal, sire.'

Napoleon laughed again, but this time somewhat sourly, I thought.

'Well, well, we shall see,' he said, 'but for the present there is your sister's marriage. You should remember that we had contemplated attaching the Prince to our own person.'

'Let the marriage go, sire!' I cried impulsively. 'My sister is quite young yet. Hereafter—'

'Ah, mon ami, you are too ambitious,' he ininterrupted with much acidity; 'the marriage is decreed.'

I bowed humbly.

'It must, however,' proceeded the Emperor, 'take place in our absence, for to-night we set out—you and I, count—for Boulogne.'

'Ah!' I cried out in a very whirl of thought.

'Diantre! Well, you do not seem anxious. It was your own proposal.'

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- 'It is my sister, sire,' I stammered.
- 'What of her?' impatiently.
- 'The fact is,' I blurted out, 'she is not so anxious for this marriage as I could wish. Women are so foolish, and she objects that the Prince is a stranger to her. I fear that in my absence—'

'Then we shall marry her to-day,' snapped out the Emperor. 'The Prince arrived an hour ago.'

He stalked off towards the door, but I called out imploringly, 'One moment, sire. If your Majesty would be so good as to say Boulogne. In that case the Prince and she could accompany us, and during the journey they might get acquainted and I could reason with her.'

- 'So much trouble for a woman!' he growled.
- 'The woman, sire, is my sister,' I retorted sharply.

He cast at me a glance of half anger, half amusement, then shrugged his shoulders.

- 'I have not heard that you have been always a devoted brother. Report has maligned you, prince,' he sneered. 'Well, then, let it be at Boulogne!'
- 'A thousand thanks, sire!' I cried, but the door crashed and I doubt if he heard me.

In a transport of delight I apostrophised the bed-post. 'Did I not say that chance is the best mistress?' I demanded. 'Blood of Mary, I'll play

cards in England yet, and with my wife beside me; my wife, do you hear?'

But the name gave me a cold turn, for I was past forty and a long-sworn bachelor. Wife! H'm! After twenty-five that is a word to make a man shiver in his shoes,

I was about to throw myself on the bed again, when with a crash one of the logs which had been burning bravely in the fireplace broke in half at the centre where the flames had licked it through and rolled from the hearthstone to the carpet. I cried out to the lackeys, and myself rushed forward to kick the faggots back and so prevent a blaze. Imagine my astonishment to perceive behind the actual fire a broad open ledge of bricks, probably designed for the heating of water, and reposing on its surface, not even scorched, there lay the crumpled-up despatch which Napoleon had thrown to the flames a little while before.

'Truly this is my lucky day!' I cried. And so it was, for had the pieces of the broken log rolled backwards instead of forward the paper would have been destroyed and I never even aware of its existence.

It is on such slender accidents as this that Providence delights in balancing larger issues. On the possession of that crumpled and soot-blackened paper, though I never guessed it, my very life depended.

CHAPTER XI

AN INTERVIEW WITH TALLEYRAND

On my outcry there entered the room, in front of the servants, a gentleman dressed in a glittering State uniform, who, when the fire was subdued and all made right again, lingered as if of right.

It is hard to describe him adequately by words, yet I knew him before he spoke, although I took pains to affect otherwise. His face was horribly sallow and inanimate; his cheeks were hollow; his large eyes dull and death-like; his lips thick and sensual, but vellow us strips of gold. He looked what he was-a diseased and worn-out profligate, and he walked in ungainly fashion on a pair of clubbed feet, hideously turned and blunted. It was hard to realise that this man, so ugly, insipid and deformed, could be the profound and subtle person whose infernal genius had constituted the most important factor in Napoleon's State successes, in the aggrandisement of France at the expense of Europe; harder still to believe him the accomplished seducer for whom the celebrated and witty Princess Cordelia had deserted a betterfavoured lover, and finally stabbed herself in despair

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at his faithlessness, and for whom countless other intelligent and beautiful ladies had gone mad.

We regarded each other mutely for a while, then he spoke, slowly, and with a certain effort, and affected deference.

'My dear prince, I had just arrived and was about to pay you my respects when you cried out for help and I took the liberty of intruding unannounced.'

'I have not the honour,' I suggested coldly.

He shrugged his shoulders. 'Ah! I was foolish to expect you to remember me, dear prince. My name is Charles Maurice Talleyrand de Perigord.' He said this with a pretended humility, which did not deceive me at all, for, if anything, the man was by nature arrogant, or his looks belied him sorely.

'I have never had the pleasure of meeting you before, monseigneur,' I responded.

'True,' he murmured, 'true,' pursing up his lips with an expression quite illegible; indeed, his countenance resembled nothing so much as a dried and twisted mask of paste.

He, uninvited, took a chair and favoured me with many furtive glances before he spoke again.

'Do you know, count,' he muttered at last, 'you have surprised us all by declaring for Napoleon.'

'Indeed!' I said coldly.

'Yes, for there are those in France who have long held your name as a synonym for loyalty to the exiled Bourbons.' He seemed to look at the floor as he murmured these words, but his great long eyes were low-lidded and deceitful, and his head was held to one side; he may have been regarding me.

I shrugged my shoulders. 'Their cause is hopeless, monseigneur. Do you not think so?'

He spread out his hands as if to avoid the question.

'Do you think so, count?' he asked.

'Has Napoleon sent him to test me?' I asked myself, but aloud I said, 'I am sure of it, monseigneur.'

'And yet,' murmured Talleyrand, almost in a whisper, 'there are many in France who think the contrary and continue to wait and hope.'

'They are fools,' I declared. 'Do you not think so?'

He spread out his hands again with a dramatic gesture. 'If one could be sure,' he muttered, and his eyes searched mine with a glance that sickened me, for more than his words it proclaimed the man a traitor.

'You mean?' I suggested coldly.

'That what has once been, dear count, may be again. The world was shocked at the death of Enghein, but France was furious.'

'France is ruled by a strong man,' I answered.

Talleyrand looked at the floor. 'Even the strongest man,' he murmured, a world of suggestion in his broken sentence.

'Speak out, monseigneur!' I commanded, holding myself in with difficulty.

'May die, count,' he answered, glancing quickly up. 'There is no man immune from death. And death may spring from many sources: disease, old age, a cannon ball, a bullet, poison, or—'

'Or,' I muttered.

He looked furtively about him then bent towards me.

'Or a dagger, monseigneur,' he whispered.

I sprang to my feet agitated past bounds; I felt my cheeks burning, my eyes hot as coals.

- 'And you,' I cried with a stinging sneer, 'are the trusted Minister of the Emperor!'
- 'I am, above all, Minister of France!' he answered, quite unmoved.
 - 'By Napoleon's word,' I grated.
 - 'By France's need,' he corrected gravely.

I folded my arms to prevent myself from strangling him.

'It is the proposition of a dastard,' I stammered, and the words near choked me, I could hardly speak.

For answer he drew from his pocket a paper which he thrust towards me. 'It is from the rightful King of France,' he said.

I snatched it from his grasp. It was a letter, in truth, from the exiled heir of the Bourbons. It ran:—

'Your message, monseigneur, has given us both hope and heart for the future of France. Long have

we watched in sorrow and heart-felt tribulation the struggles, the momentary successes, the mad excesses of our fate-stricken and disloyal subjects. If by the hand of Providence the usurper be laid low, and France calls to us, it will be our duty to return—our sad duty, monseigneur. In such a case it will be our pleasure to pardon rather than to punish, for France has for her faults already suffered much. All those who assist in the great work will merit our protection, ay, even he whose hand shall strike the blow. We shall be humbled by the means whereby we come to our own, but, as the Church teaches us, the end may justify the method, and what aim could be more noble than that which seeks to give peace, not only to our labouring country, but to the whole distracted world, which is now ridden by a monster. In the future, you, monseigneur, shall live in our gratitude and especial care.'

During the reading of this letter I was able to calm myself. I abandoned the suspicion that Napoleon had sent Talleyrand to sound me. I foresaw that more was to come. I foresaw that all this was but the prelude to the proposition of some monstrous infamy. I turned to him at last, calm as ice.

^{&#}x27;I perceive you are accredited, monseigneur,' I said gravely.

^{&#}x27;Eh, bien!' he answered. 'It has taken long to convince you.'

'And this interposition of Providence which is hinted at?' I asked, pointing to the letter.

He smiled. 'Napoleon sets out to-night to Boulogne,' he muttered.

- 'I accompany him,' I struck in.
- 'You?' he gasped, starting with surprise.

I nodded. 'I and my sister.'

- 'Ah, that is better. See that you do not ride in the Emperor's carriage during the first part of the journey.'
 - 'Where will it take place?' I demanded hoarsely.
 - 'In the forest of Compiègne.'
 - 'How?' My throat felt parched.
- 'Napoleon rides with his usual escort, a paltry handful. He ever depends for his protection upon the love France bears him. Bah!' and he gave vent to a low, diabolic laugh.

I shuddered. 'Proceed, monseigneur!'

'In the heart of the forest, near the village of d'Amboise, even now lie in wait nigh a regiment of Chouans, who have so far escaped capture in spite of all Napoleon's efforts to run them down. They are led by the Comte de Sevigné. An hour since my messengers set out to warn them of their chance.'

But I had got all I wanted. For this I had restrained myself, listened with a smooth face to his words, allowed him to suppose me in favour of his hideous designs. Not to have saved my life, not to have saved Clarisse, not to have saved England, and

I love my country, from damnation, could I have longer forborne with this dastard traitor, this assassin.

With a cry which sounded strange and unnatural to my own ears, I threw myself upon him, forgetting, in the rage and indignation which consumed me, my wound and my weakness.

In a second my hands were round his throat. He struck out at me, but he was a child in my rough grasp.

I marked with savage satisfaction his eyes start from their sockets, his tongue protrude, his lips coarsen and swell, his flesh turn blue. With his last strength he kicked over the table, which fell to the floor with a crash. He tried to scream, but I strangled the cry in his throat. In ten seconds more he would have been past human aid; when of a sudden fierce hands assailed me. I hung on blindly with all the strength of desperation, but an angry voice was hurled into my ears.

'Madman, give over!' It was the voice of Napoleon.

I staggered back, pale and panting, trembling in all my frame, while Talleyrand dropped to the floor, limp and unconscious, where he was immediately ministered to by Ali, the Emperor's Mameluke.

I stared around me, stupid and half-dazed. Napoleon and Ségur stood regarding me. Ségur openly amazed, the Emperor with a quizzical gleam in his eyes, an illegible smile just turning the edges of his lips.

'So, not content with killing my engineer, you now wish to murder my Minister?' he said menacingly.

I snatched up the Bourbon letter from the floor.

'Sire, that man is a traitor!' I cried hotly. 'I can prove it.'

'Bah!' said the Emperor, with a contemptuous shrug.

But his contempt maddened me. 'He is an assassin besides, and has planned your death to-night in the forest of Compiègne.'

I gasped this speech out almost hysterically.

'Prove your words!' said Napoleon, sternly; he was bending over Tallyrand, who showed signs of returning consciousness.

'I implore you to read this letter, sire!' I cried.

He glanced at it coldly. 'I have seen it before,' he said with much indifference.

At that I stood like a fool, entirely nonplussed, too overcome to think coherently, too angry to formulate a solitary expression. My wounded arm, moreover, commenced to pain devilishly, for the bandage had slipped, and blood was dripping to the floor.

Meanwhile Talleyrand opened his eyes, and observing the Emperor he muttered hoarsely, 'It is not only your soldiers, sire, who risk their lives in your service.'

Napoleon answered him something which I did

not catch, then turned to me with outstretched hand and a frank, good-humoured smile.

'You must try and forgive me, count, for this little comedy. I saw and heard all. I now know you for a true man as well as a brave.'

So I had been played with after all. The whole affair was but a hoax, a plot arranged solely to test me. I was near choked with rage.

'It was an unpardonable jest,' I cried hotly.

'It was not a jest at all,' replied the Emperor with a dry smile. 'It was a precaution which your reputation has more than justified. But' (and his face softened) 'I see your wound has opened; Ségur, send at once for my physician.'

He crossed the room as he spoke and gently, indeed affectionately, took up my injured arm.

'There is much for you to do,' he whispered; 'we cannot afford that you should lose your strength.'

I shrugged my shoulders.

'Much needed indeed was your precaution,' I growled, 'since it has proved you in the wrong. Bah! what a waste of fine sentiment. If I had but known!'

The Emperor smiled and pinched my ear. 'Eh, rascal, and what if you had known?' he cried goodhumouredly.

'In that case it is not I who would have been made a fool of,' I retorted.

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He laughed outright, and leading me to the bed forced me to lie down. Then he beckoned Talleyrand to approach. 'You two must be friends,' he commanded.

Talleyrand twisted his features into a grin. 'Indeed, sire,' he answered, 'I would not have it otherwise. The count's methods are far too convincing towards his enemies and yours, sire.'

Napoleon laughed again, and after Talleyrand had shaken me by the hand he departed upon his Minister's arm. My feelings were for a time strangely mixed, but the Emperor's smile had been so kind, and his manner so winning and affectionate, that I came at last to almost wish I were indeed the Count d'Arras.

CHAPTER XII

A NATION OF SHOPKEEPERS

WHEN the surgeon had finished with my arm I despatched a note to the Empress, begging her to allow my sister to visit me, urging, as an excuse for the request, a sudden illness; but I entertained no doubt lest Josephine would know exactly what that phrase portended, for by this news of the duel must have percolated through and through the palace.

Clarisse brought Josephine's answer in person, under the escort of the Prince, her *fiancé*.

To my surprise she had already established an amicable, indeed a confidential, relationship, and seemed perfectly at her ease with him, while the Prince was quite plainly captivated with her beauty and vivacity. Indeed, no man who possessed a heart of flesh and blood and an ordinary human disposition could have resisted her, for she was tricked out for conquest, and beautiful as a dream.

I will not say that I was altogether pleased at her swift rapprochement with her husband-elect. The little wretch could not have known the man an hour.

and yet she had all the appearance of gushing over him. Still I must admit that the Prince was a man of parts. He possessed most distinguished manners. He was rather short than tall, but his face was aristocratic, well-bred and thoughtful. His forehead was, if narrow, very high and noble. His nose was long and straight, and above it his narrow but finely-pencilled brows met in true Grecian fashion, while his eyes were large and well shaped, although of a detestable greenish tinge. His mouth and chin were rather weak if weighed in the opinion of a critic, but they were exquisitely chiselled and by no means indecisive.

I judged him to be a man whose particular failing would be a misjudged obstinacy, a tenacity of purpose in clinging to his own opinions right or wrong. He bore the name of being a religious bigot; I made sure, on sight of him, that he was narrow-minded, for his eyes were set too close together to permit him to view the world with broad and charitable vision. On the whole, had I been the real D'Arras, I fancied I might have given my sister to him without much hesitation, for not one of his points was entirely bad.

Clarisse presented him with the archness of a born coquette, and it was not long before I perceived that she was for some reason at odds with me.

The Prince rather affectedly condoled with me

about my injury. He vowed he was mightily glad to make my acquaintance, hoped that we should be good friends, and then withdrew, promising to call for Clarisse again in a half-hour's time.

Immediately the door had closed upon him my sister was turned into a block of ice. She stood afar from my bedside, stiff as a prop, and refused to meet my eyes.

- 'Eh, bien!' I commenced, 'you appear to have made good progress, mademoiselle. The Prince only arrived this morning.'
- 'Yes.' The word was like a dagger, the voice indescribable.
 - 'You like him, mademoiselle?'
 - 'Yes.'
 - 'Much?'
- 'Yes.'
 - 'Very much, mademoiselle?'
 - 'Yes.'
 - 'You perhaps love him?'
 - 'Perhaps.'

By this time my temper had warmed considerably. I raised myself upon my uninjured arm and regarded her profile with much severity.

'In that case permit me to offer my congratulations,' I remarked as cuttingly as possible. 'I am very glad that you have been able to change so quickly, for thereby I am saved a vast amount of trouble.'

- 'What do you mean, monsieur?'
- 'Merely that as I leave Paris for Boulogne to-night with the Emperor, I had arranged for your marriage to be postponed and for yourself and the Prince to accompany us. As matters are now, however, the marriage need not be delayed, and I can make my adieux this evening to a princess.'

She looked me in the eyes. 'That would be much better, since it will save you a vast amount of trouble, monsieur.'

I swore savagely under my breath, but managed to get out presently,—

- 'I seem to have displeased you, mademoiselle?' She gave a pretty shrug of contempt.
- 'Do not let that trouble you, monsieur.'
- 'How have I displeased you, Clarisse?' I demanded impatiently.
- 'It is nothing,' she answered, and turned her back upon me.

I fell upon the bed thoroughly enraged. 'Well, if she likes,' I said to myself. 'I have done nothing to hurt her. She can go to the devil,' and I closed my eyes, breathing hard. It was then a miracle happened. In a flash Clarisse was bending over me, all charming care and sweet solicitation.

'Does it hurt very much, Caryl?' she asked, and her voice was tenderness itself.

I was not fool enough to miss my chance. 'Awfully,' I groaned.

'Ah, bon Dieu! and I can do nothing.' She stooped down, this quaint creature of tricks and moods, and kissed the bandages. I had much ado to prevent myself from clasping her to me, but I knew better than that.

'Oh, don't!' I gasped, 'the least touch pains it.'
She drew back with white face. 'What a brute
I am!' she cried.

I confess that instead of feeling ashamed, as no doubt I should, her emotion gave me exquisite delight. I turned up the whites of my eyes and muttered reproachfully, 'What does it matter to you? You don't care for me, you love the Prince?'

- 'It is not true!' she cried in a storm.
- 'You said so,' I declared.
- 'What if I did, you knew it was not so.'
- 'You said so,' I repeated.
- 'You know I love you, Caryl,' she muttered, tears in her eyes. 'It is you who do not love me.'
 - 'Prove that,' I cried.
 - 'You said I was a trouble to you.'
 - 'But why, you little vixen?'
- 'And oh!'—she was fairly whimpering now—'you went out and fought a duel this morning and you might have been killed, and I was with you last night and you said nothing about it, oo! oo! oo!'

I sat up suddenly and took her in my arms.

'See here, you scamp!' I muttered. 'I was safe

enough. Those are man's affairs. In any case I could have told you nothing.'

But she broke away. 'You could have told me nothing!' she cried, her big eyes staring at me, ah! so reproachfully.

- 'Well,' I stammered, 'those are man's affairs, baby!'
- 'Man's affairs, and you might have been killed! Oh, Caryl! I will never forgive you.'
 - 'Now, pet, do be sensible.'
 - 'No, I will never forgive you.'

I fancied this was about the time when my arm ought to come into use again.

- 'Ough!' I cried suddenly.
- 'What is it?' she gasped. 'Is it paining you again?'
 - 'Ugh, yes, it's hurting terribly!'
 - 'Oh, what shall I do? Shall I send for the surgeon?'
- 'No!' I cried sharply. 'It will be better in a minute. It hurts most when you are unkind to me.'

She was back at my side by this, and presently we had effected a truce, but not before I had promised to always tell her immediately I had at any future time a quarrel on my hands.

She then admitted that the Prince was an unsightly nobody who could by no means be compared with me. In fact, she loathed, despised and hated him.

This confession was very delightful, but I took

it cum grano salis, for I am sure that no more desperate a flirt or coquette ever existed than my little sweetheart.

Afterwards I made her partially aware of how matters stood, and of my plans and hopes for our ultimate escape.

They were for the most part hopes unfortunately, for a proper plan was under the circumstances impossible to formulate.

One thing I urged on her, however: 'You must immediately engage a maid to accompany you to Boulogne; a pretty maid and one nearly as possible your own height and figure.'

'Why pretty?' she demanded.

I had my own opinion on the subject, but I put her off. 'She must be pretty,' I urged; 'she may have to take your place for a while.' She plied me with questions, but once her promise obtained I laughed them aside. Then I obtained my darling's measurements, and in this connection I would advise every man to be his sweetheart's tailor. The operation of measuring is an exceedingly delicate one, especially if the contemplated object of apparel be a suit of masculine habiliments. Ah, me! what fun it was, and how she blushed and boxed my ears! They tingle now at the remembrance, for she boxed them with hearty good-will.

The matter was just completed when the Prince was announced.

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He came in, an object of perfection from head to foot, immaculate, faultless; and his bow was courtesy itself.

'I trust I do not come too soon,' he murmured gently, 'but in that case you must forgive me; it was hard to keep away!'

Clarisse blushed with pleasure at the compliment. Oh, Clarisse!

I plunged at once into business.

'I daresay your Highness has heard that to-night the Emperor sets out for Boulogne.'

He bowed.

'The Emperor,' I proceeded, 'has commanded me to accompany him, a fact at which my poor little sister is desolate, for she has always vowed that no one but myself shall give her to her husband.'

The Prince smiled. 'That is very sad,' he observed.

'The only way out of the difficulty,' I pursued, 'would be for mademoiselle and yourself to make the journey with us to Boulogne. The Emperor has already expressed his consent to such an arrangement—'

'Oh, mon Dieu! what is this?' suddenly cried out Clarisse.

Taking advantage of my preoccupation, mademoiselle had been making a grand tour of my apartment. She had found my doublet lying in a cupboard, and curiosity had induced her to investigate to extremes, with the result that she now dangled my doublet in one hand, in the other De Sevringen's purse and ivory skull. She looked so very comical standing so, an expression of utmost horror on her pretty face, that the Prince and I burst out laughing.

Presently, however, I recovered and affected an air of great sternness. 'What, mademoiselle! you have been searching my pockets? At least you might wait until you can practise on your husband!'

She made an entrancing little grimace. 'My husband might object,' she pouted.

'Eh, Prince, what do you say?' I asked. 'Will you allow your wife such a liberty?'

He made a low reverence and answered impressively, 'Whatever my wife might care to do would of necessity enchant me.'

'But you, my brother,' cried Clarisse, with a wicked glance at me, 'would you not permit your wife such a privilege?'

'When I marry,' I replied loftily, 'I shall know how to protect my belongings, even from my wife.'

'Indeed, we shall see!' retorted the girl with a defiant shrug, then rippled with laughter at the play of words, until her eyes fell on the skull again and she shuddered.

'Bring it to me!' I commanded.

She advanced, the little actress, with the air of a child who is in disgrace. 'Please, monseigneur, what is it for?' she asked demurely I took it and

pressed a spring so that it opened, showing the paste within.

'Oh, what a lovely odour! What is it—a cosmetic?' cried Clarisse.

'A sweetmeat,' I shrugged.

She snatched it from my hand and retreated quickly from the bed. 'If you are very good I shall give you some,' she cried, dancing about with the spirit of a baby. 'Would you not desire some, monsieur?' to the Prince.

'Anything, mademoiselle, from your hands,' murmured the Prince, whom I could see was fast approaching a maudlin state of rapt adoration.

'Then down upon your knees, sir. So!'

The Prince fell on one knee without an instant's hesitation. Clarisse took some of the paste out with her dainty finger, and, to my rage, allowed the Prince to fondle her hand and actually lick the stuff off. The deliberate coquetry of the proceeding set me raging.

'It is your turn now,' said the girl to me, approaching the bed as she spoke, but seeing my face she uttered a cry. 'Your arm is hurting, dear?'

'No,' I muttered, 'at least not much. When you took the skull it hurt a little.'

She threw away the skull with a gesture of loathing and came to me, trembling all over. 'Forgive me, dear monsieur, dear brother,' she

muttered, and her eyes were dimmed with two big tears.

It was hard to refrain from doing so in such a mood. But I took the opportunity afforded by her penitence to get to business again, and in a very few moments had gained the Prince's consent to the arrangement that his marriage with my sister should take place at Boulogne.

Indeed I fancy he would have consented to anything except an undue postponement of the nuptials, for he appeared to be in a state bordering upon His eyes were always fastened on the idiotcv. witch as though he were a boy and she a lolly-stick, but I daresay I should not blame him too much for that, since my condition in regard to Clarisse was not extraordinarily dissimilar. Before taking his leave he suggested that he should bring my sister again to visit me in the afternoon, for the purpose of lightening my loneliness. However, I detected art in this proposal. No doubt it bristled with unselfishness, but nevertheless it is true that it would give him opportunities of increasing his intimacy with her which otherwise the strict etiquette of the Court must have denied him. And although Clarisse ardently seconded the plan, I firmly refused to entertain it.

I had work to do, I assured them. All sorts of business to attend to, clothes to prepare and so on.

At the mention of clothes my sweet sister blushed. When once alone again I propounded to myself this serious proposition—What is to be done with the Prince?

The solution was, however, difficult to arrive at. I could not fight him, I could not assassinate him: I disliked to hurt him. And yet if I wished to get Clarisse from France it was absolutely necessary that something should happen to her husband-elect during the journey to Boulogne.

I might poison him, that is administer to him some drug which would delay him on the road. On the road he must be stopped somehow, by fair means or foul. That was necessary. Well, it must be a drug! What drug? I knew the effects of jalap. Jalap, besides, is easily procurable. Jalap it must be, well and good. I dismissed the subject with a shrug.

That afternoon I had a nasty accident. I tripped on the carpet while talking to my lackey, fell face downwards on the floor and gashed my head badly from chin to temple. Then, again, in shaving I gave my chin an ugly cut. Truly my nerves must have been in a shocking state of disorder. But the fact is I had been reflecting, and my reason informed me that it was a ridiculous thing to hope that, having so far escaped detection, I should have the same good fortune right along the line. The more I thought of the matter the more a miracle it appeared that someone who had known the real Count d'Arras (and many must have known, and must still remember, a person of so distinguished a family, of royal blood,

to renew old acquaintanceship and in that act accomplish my destruction. No, I decided that a miracle like that could not be often repeated. I would be a madman to expect it. Therefore my accident! Therefore my cut chin! Thereafter I would have defied the devil himself to have recognised me from a wounded bully of the Latin quarter; for bandages surrounded my head, concealing even my hair; a bandage covered my chin, and my nose was a horrible sight to behold, being crossed four times with strips of court plaster.

Napoleon and Talleyrand came to visit me in the evening. When the Emperor caught sight of my face he first anxiously inquired if my injuries were serious; then, being reassured, roared with laughter at the figure I cut. While I, pretending violent indignation, stamped and swore at him, apparently quite forgetting myself. But the Emperor was too amused to reprove me for some time, indeed, until he remembered that he had business and then he was stern enough on instant.

Napoleon has been frequently pictured by his enemies, English as well as Continental, as an actor, a clever charlatan, pitchforked by a derisive fate into a position of matchless eminence.

However, I have never held with those who would seek to explain his success so facilely. The man, as I have perceived him, gave evidence of attributes as great at least as his successes. That he possessed extraordinary qualities of brain and intellect no one could doubt who had come in contact with him. Observing him, one was compelled to recognise a personality of gigantic masterfulness and strength of purpose. He dominated all around him by a glance, a nod, without necessity of speech. His countenance was a mask strangely adapted for the expression of command. He may have been an actor, but he threw himself so ardently into each rôle he played that he became thereby the actual personification of the character he wished to represent. A quality of genius this, it must be conceded, even in a charlatan, and the Corsican self-made Emperor was by no means a charlatan.

His change of front was so abrupt and so complete that, although my rage was mere assumption, I was completely disconcerted. He had recollected that he was Emperor, and that his mirth had given opportunity for me to be indecorous. At his frown I stammered and was silent. His eyes punished and chastised me with more directness than a devised and brutal speech.

The silence was become intolerable, when Talleyrand, in his slow, oily accents, spoke: 'It is fortunate, sire, that monsieur's injuries are not more serious,' he said, and his thought was that of a true courtier who wishes to break up an unpleasant situation.

I felt for him a sentiment of almost gratitude. The Emperor removed his glance from me and took a chair.

'It is easy to be seen that you have resided for some time in England,' he observed with a sneer. It was fashionable at that time for Frenchmen to pretend that English gentlemen possessed the manners of boors, the habits of pigs.

I felt a flush of rage rise in my cheeks, and meditated an angry retort, but a glance from the Minister restrained me. 'It has not been altogether my fault, sire,' I returned, purposely giving the words ambiguous emphasis.

Napoleon shrugged his shoulders. 'Talleyrand has suffered a similar misfortune,' he remarked, 'and affects to know these English thoroughly. For that reason I have brought him here to compare notes with you before me. I should like to hear your opinion of the English Ministers. We have already expended large sums in feeding their rapaciousness, we should be now assured of the adherence of some, at least, to our cause, but it is otherwise, with no exception, for Lord Melville, our mainstay, is no longer in office.'

'I believe them for the most part to be honest and able men,' I replied, with a bow.

'Else,' murmured Talleyrand, 'their enemies would have long ago exposed their ignorance and corruption; besides, they are too well paid to be rogues.' 'And yet they take our money greedily,' cried Napoleon.

'Ah, that is the national characteristic!' replied the Minister. 'An Englishman will traffic in anything for gold; he will sell everything, even his honour, but the person who is foolish enough to buy that commodity will often find himself cheated, being nothing the richer for his bargain. What think you, monseigneur?'

'I think,' I answered gravely, 'that you do the character of our enemies, at all events, partial injustice; they are not all rapacious, they are not all rogues. It is well known that they are the most charitable nation in Europe—witness the number of their public establishments for the relief of suffering humanity; they are, besides, generous in other ways—'

'Bah!' interrupted Talleyrand, 'if no nation is more charitable, no other nation has so many newspapers to make the world acquainted with its generosity.'

Napoleon watched me keenly. 'We have been informed,' he said slowly, 'that a large portion of the population, including some of the leading members of the Opposition itself, is only awaiting an opportunity to compass a revolution and erect a republic upon the ruins of destroyed monarchy.'

'In all countries, sire,' I replied cautiously, 'disappointed ambition, empty purses, hungry stomachs,

are terrible incitements to declaim against courts, to plan reforms, to plot revolutions. The levellers of England, I believe, sire, are your allies, and eager to welcome the aid your coming offers to their schemes.'

'My very words, sire!' cried Talleyrand, excitedly.

'But the Opposition itself, what real assistance would they be to us when the time comes?' demanded the Emperor.

'They have no present hope of office,' I replied; 'they will harass and hamper the Government at every step. What greater service could they render?'

Napoleon was, I think, well pleased, but he coldly turned to Talleyrand. 'That is not your opinion, monseigneur?'

'But it is, sire,' returned the Minister, sharply. 'It is true that I believe the Opposition only want places and pensions to become as loyal subjects as the Ministers, but the Government is tenacious and powerful, and in default of realising their hopes the Opposition can be reckoned as our friends.'

'Good!' said the Emperor, rubbing his palms together with a gesture of much satisfaction. 'Good! then our money is not all wasted.'

'We shall get it back again with interest,' murmured Talleyrand. 'England is a rich land, sire; only fools and men of genius do not thrive there.'

'What!' I cried in astonishment, 'you class such opposites together!'

'Assuredly,' sneered the Minister. 'What country

on earth has treated with more neglect and contempt its men of genius and eminence, whose works in doing honour to their country have at the same time instructed and delighted their contemporaries? Why, the most of them, even the greatest, have died in hospitals or gaols—poets, authors, soldiers, statesmen, all alike.'

There was a grain of truth in this indictment that held me speechless, but Napoleon smiled at my dismay. 'You do not agree?' he asked.

'I am remembering a visit that I once made to Westminster Abbey,' I stammered, 'when I marvelled at magnificent monuments erected to the memory of all who have truly served England.'

Talleyrand laughed sardonically. 'Monuments!'he sneered. 'Bah! yes, monuments of unfeeling vanity, erected less to honour the glorious dead than to preserve from proper oblivion the worthless names of those whose niggard meanness and littleness shortened the lives of those men of merit. Wait! on those very monuments I will one day show you sculptured, blazoned indeed, in every case, the names of those who paid the sculptor. Thus in England may ignorance and illiberality purchase, at the cost of a few guineas, immortality!'

'A nation of shopkeepers,' said Napoleon, 'but before long we shall change all that. What think you, monseigneur?'

'I think, sire,' I answered gravely, 'that you have set yourself a task worthy of your genius.'

'But your opinion, count, of the issue?' cried the Emperor, tartly, rising as he spoke.

I bowed low and reverently, a veritable courtier, smiling in order to repress a dangerous desire to sneer. 'I think, sire, that your ministers will soon be set a task still more difficult.'

'And that?' with undisguised impatience.

I bowed again. 'To devise a fitting title, sire, wherewith to name the Master of the Universe. "Emperor" will one day grow too small and inexpressive.'

Napoleon was vain, vain. I saw in his mien then—written on his trembling lips, which he bit to control, painted in his eyes which he averted to avoid my glance—vanity of vanities, and in my heart I mocked him for the weakness I had at length discovered in a man otherwise of iron. He turned from me abruptly, discourteously, and strode from the room, as if in great displeasure at the flattery; but I did not need Talleyrand's half-envious smile to be assured that none the less I had struck home and stood in the Emperor's highest favour. I gained sweet hope that moment that I was safe and sure to be in England soon.

CHAPTER XIII

A NARROW ESCAPE

ONCE alone, I settled myself on my couch for an hour or two of quiet rest before the journey, but I was not allowed to remain undisturbed for long.

First came a message from the Empress, expressing Her Majesty's deep regret that she was unable to accompany my sister to Boulogne that evening, but faithfully promising to set out the following morning and to be present at the nuptials. To this I answered in fitting terms, expressing my deep appreciation of Her Majesty's complaisant kindness.

Then came the tailor who had been commissioned to make Clarisse a suit of boy's clothes. He was a perfect cormorant, and having scented an intrigue made exorbitant demands, which I was compelled, having no choice left, to satisfy.

Thirdly came a veiled woman, who refused to give her name to my servants, but implored a private interview.

I was too nervous by this, though, to admit her, fearing she might be some amie fidèle of the man whose name I had assumed; and knowing that to be

too great a danger to hazard, I pleaded weakness from my wound, and made an appointment for the morrow. She was importunate for long, but finally departed, in tears, the secretary informed me. Who knows, she may have been that same Amélie who penned the letter which had so touched me on my arrival at St Cloud.

There is no peace vouchsafed the wicked. I had barely reposed myself the fourth time when the Duc d'Otranto was announced. I scarcely dared refuse so eminent a scoundrel audience, so he entered presently, bearing under his arm a long mahogany case, richly inlaid with mother-of-pearl and gold.

'Ah, my dear prince,' he cried, 'how grieved I am to find you indisposed! Ever since your arrival I have been dying to have a word with you, but State business has always interposed. And but an hour ago I heard that you are to set out with the Emperor this evening for Boulogne. That must be my excuse for intruding on your leisure hour.'

'You of all men need no excuse, my dear duke,' I murmured civilly. 'I pray you be seated.'

He nodded, put the case he carried on his knees, then begging me to lie down again, drew his chair to my bedside.

'I have presumed to bring with me a little offering,' he said, smiling, and opening the case drew forth a shining sword.

I sprang up, unable to repress a cry of admiration,

for the weapon was fit for a king to wear. It was straight and long, clip-hilted and formed of plain Damascus steel, traced like a Malay dagger from blade to hilt with waving gold. The hilt was transversed in the manner of Turkish weapons, and ornamented with a crescent elegantly arabesqued and crusted with splendid emeralds. The scabbard was of pure silver, engraved with such richness of design and execution as to defy description.

'This for me?' I muttered, wondering as I spoke what could be the reason of a gift so princely.

'If you will honour me so far as accept it,' returned Fouché. 'The blade has a history; it is old and has been worn by sultans if the Pacha of Masoulk may be believed. It was the price of the Maréchal Ney's friendship and the reason that the Pacha himself still lives after his treachery at Alexandria. I won it at faro from the Chevalier Fenelon, to whom Ney bartered it for the possession of the matchless Madame Bouciconère.'

I handled the sword with the keenest pleasure, more in love with it each instant and longing to test its properties.

'It has a motto,' I observed—'" Inshalla Shafa." Can you translate it, duke?'

'A bad motto, but who shall say inappropriate for a sword,' smiled Fouché. 'It means, "In the name of God, spare!"'

I shuddered a little, for the duke's voice held a

spice of blasphemous mockery, and a sneer underlay his words. I placed the sword beside me on the bed. 'I shall always treasure it in memory of the giver,' I said, more coldly than was wise I think.

But Fouché appeared not to notice. 'Keep it rather as a memento of my friendship, prince,' he said earnestly.

I smiled. 'But yesterday I was forgotten, or unknown to you,' I retorted.

'Neither unknown nor forgotten,' he protested.

I pointed to the sword. 'But this has a meaning, duke?'

'Assuredly; I offer you with that my services, my friendship; I beg your kindly offices in return. It seems to me that we should do well to be friends, prince.'

'Friends,' I repeated reflectively.

'And why not, monseigneur? I assure you that my services will be of use to you. I say it advisedly. I have some power in France, monseigneur; there is nothing may transpire from one end of this country to another without my cognisance. Have you a friend to advance?—through me you may most easily and without risk or trouble advance him. Have you an enemy to ruin?—a word and any punishment you devise may be inflicted, and all secretly as the grave, prince. Is there a woman you desire, monseigneur?—name her, and in an hour she will be in your arms, or at least in your power.'

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'But in return for these favours?' I suggested, smiling.

Fouché shrugged his shoulders and spread out his hands. 'Your co-operation, monseigneur,' he answered dryly.

'In what?'

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He glanced at me craftily with his great goggle eyes.

- 'Only in those things wherein friends should cooperate,' he murmured softly.
 - 'For instance, duke?'
- 'Personal aggrandisement, advancement, power, amusement.'
 - 'And politics?' I suggested with a subtle smile.

Fouché laughed. 'That is implied, monseigneur. The man of intellect or of ambition nowadays may, through politics alone, obtain either amusement, power, riches or aggrandisement.'

- 'So it seems in France,' I said musingly.
- 'Or elsewhere,' cried Fouché, eagerly; 'even in that cursed country you come from dwelling in, where the aristocrats, in spite of their insolence, are for a great part paupers and without a vestige of authority, save in their starveling homes.'
- 'True,' I muttered, pretending to appear somewhat convinced; 'but the strivers sometimes fall, duke.'
 - 'Not if they are wise, prince.'
 - 'And sufficiently selfish.'

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'Pardon!' cried Fouché, quickly, 'that is the doctrine of Monsieur Talleyrand. And who shall say he does not follow his *credo* to the last letter of the practice?'

'You do not agree with him, duke?' I inquired with curiosity.

He shifted uneasily in his chair. 'It is a matter of disposition, monseigneur; I cannot. Talleyrand declares that the most successful man in every path of life is necessarily the most selfish. He indeed asserts that any person gifted with even ordinary talents and ambition may, if likewise endowed with impervious egotism, reach the place he aims at, however far removed from reach. It is true that most of those criminals whose crimes have shocked the world have generally been detected at last owing to some altruistic lapse, some inexplicable fracture in their inhuman armour of selfishness. Monsieur Talleyrand relies on such examples to support his contention.'

'It cannot be said that Monsieur Talleyrand runs much risk in that direction,' I observed dryly.

'That is the opinion of many, monseigneur,' said Fouché. 'For my part I do not hold with him. It is my firm belief that no man, however highly placed, can proceed always without that help which may be alone rendered by disinterested friends. It is, moreover, true that to acquire such friendship it is necessary to make some sacrifices.'

'You would have me then believe that you are

more or less disinterested, duke?' I inquired with quiet cynicism.

'I have revealed to you my heart,' returned Fouché, speaking with a certain air of reserve which quickened my curiosity.

The man's repute belied his words and I more than ever asked myself the questions — Why his untimely visit? why his extravagant gift to me? I toyed with the hilt of the sword and answered slowly by asking a question, 'What is it you require me to do for you, monseigneur?'

Fouché started back and cried reproachfully, 'Why, nothing, prince! nothing, nothing!'

I felt sure then that he required a great deal, but I took care to appear surprised, and also a little confused. 'Forgive me should I have misjudged you,' I muttered.

'You have misjudged me,' he replied with dignity. 'I have not only nothing to gain from you, now at least, but I have come to visit you to-night in order to render you a service.'

'Ah,' said I, 'a service, duke.'

He took from his pocket a paper, which he unfolded and spread upon his knee, watching me intently the while.

- 'This is a letter from Louis Capet, the Bourbon, our exiled King,' he whispered mysteriously.
 - 'And then?' I demanded.
 - 'Ah, and then, prince! If this letter could find its

way to Napoleon's hands your life would be worth but little, mon ami. An hour's purchase, perhaps, no more.'

It is not a matter of surprise that his words made me both alarmed and curious. I could not doubt that the real D'Arras was in communication with the Bourbon Prince; it seemed to me not improbable that Fouché might be a traitor to Napoleon-at least so far as treasonable correspondence went. history was not such as to inspire confidence in the man-a red republican turned imperialist, a roué, a gambler and a rapacious robber. But it was impossible that Louis could know that I was posing as D'Arras, or even suspect that the real D'Arras was in France at this time. An instant's reflection informed me that this letter, whatever it contained, was either a forgery or that its contents were exaggerated and referred only to the past.

I smiled tranquilly. 'That would be a sad happening, duke; but what does Louis say of me?' 'This letter is addressed to Talleyrand,' said Fouché, not heeding my question.

'Then how came it to your hands?' I inquired.

He frowned and whispered, 'What matters that? what matters that? How often must I tell Louis that Talleyrand is not to be trusted? Louis's time is not yet, not yet; a little while, a little while, and who knows? Bah! Talleyrand de Perigord is an aristocrat, it is true, but he is a rascal without heart. He now takes

straightwayall his correspondence to Napoleon, for the Emperor is still firm upon his feet. But let him once totter and then we should see no one more loyal to the exiled King, no voice more mighty in sounding his recall.'

'I do not doubt you,' I answered drily, 'but how does that concern this letter?'

'In a measure it concerns that, and you, and all of us, mon prince. It is to warn you I am come, to implore you to join with me in warning Louis that Talleyrand is not to be depended on. Why, even the happening of this day should have proclaimed that fact to you. How you slipped from the net spread for your fall I can even yet scarce conceive. I knew of it but could not, dared not, warn you. Providence alone saved you. It was magnificent.'

His intimate knowledge of events and cool assumption that I must be a traitor to Napoleon staggered me. Feeling half dazed I murmured,—

'You mistake, monsieur; the letter! the letter!' and held out my hand.

He looked at me keenly, his glance wolfish but illegible. 'The letter,' he said, 'is sent to Talleyrand. My spies just in time arrested the courier, who now is lodged in my own house, where he awaits to bear Louis a reply—a reply which we shall write together if it please you, prince.'

I felt as though in a dream, embarrassed and beset. Had I been the real D'Arras I would have known my course. As it was I was overcome with doubt. The man appeared to be in deepest earnest. It seemed that a chance lay open for me to serve my country through the treachery of France's Ministers, and yet I shrank from the task. One trap had been set for me, why not two? And yet in this instance I did not suspect a trap. It flashed upon me, however, that the game was not worth the candle, that I had already done enough, that it would be foolish to hazard too much. Fortune had already been overkind, it would be unwise to strain the favour of the fickle goddess; moreover, I had yet to get out of France.

Slowly I sat up on the bed and allowed my feet to drop to the floor.

'You suggest, then, sending a letter to Louis without Napoleon's knowledge?' I demanded.

'Surely, prince, you are dreaming,' muttered Fouché.

'Ah, it is you, then, who have put me to sleep in very surprise!' I cried satirically.

He started back in apparent alarm. 'What mean you, monseigneur?' he demanded in a low, grim voice.

'I mean,' I retorted sharply, 'that it is not good to serve at the same time two masters, monsieur. It seems to me that we each have changed our coats, and more than once, perhaps, but we both now wear the livery of the Corsican. For my part' (and I pointed to the ruffles on my sleeves), 'I like this

uniform amazingly, it suits me passing well; besides, I am tired of change. In fact, monsieur, I am convinced that further change is impossible for a decade at least.'

Fouché was on his feet by this, eyeing me with a wild and angry gaze. 'But,' he stammered, 'this letter, monseigneur, it is your death-warrant.'

- 'I do not think so,' I replied indifferently 'The Corsican is no fool and I am sure he trusts me.'
- 'There are names here,' stuttered Fouché, tapping the paper excitedly; 'have you heard of Savrache, monseigneur?'
 - 'Nor do I wish to,' I retorted coldly.
 - 'La Croix, monseigneur?'
- 'Ha! the assassin!' I cried; 'the inventor of the infernal machine from which Napoleon so narrowly escaped last autumn!'
- 'I have you touched,' cried Fouché, seemingly relieved.
- 'He is here in Paris, with me, in my power, both ready and anxious.'
- 'Well,' I interrupted with a feeling half of horror, half of admiration, 'you are a very pretty scoundrel, duke, and a very proper coward too, it seems to me; but for my part I prefer La Croix to you. He at least has the courage of his opinions.'

He gazed at me in angry uncertainty. 'Devil take me, I cannot understand you,' he growled at last.

'Scarce a week since, you and others hired La Croix to assassinate the Emperor, and now—'

'You are an infernal liar!' I cried sharply.

He was stung to the quick. 'Liar!' he cried, 'liar!' and rushed to the doorway. In a second he returned, accompanied by three men, two of whom I had no difficulty in recognising as police spies in spite of their gaudy uniforms as officers of hussars.

The third, the man who walked between the others, was a stunted specimen of humanity, small and sallow, with high cheek bones, a horribly prognathous jaw, low, flat forehead, and the face of a fanatic. He was undoubtedly a prisoner; his fingers worked with constant twitchings; he appeared both alarmed and anxious, and glanced about him furtively from out the palest grey eyes I have ever seen.

'Liar!' repeated Fouché, grinning at me with the face of a wolf. 'Repeat that before your confederate, 'monseigneur!'

'Why, certainly, but is this La Croix?' I asked disdainfully.

On mention of that name the little man before me started perceptibly and glared at me with fierce intentness.

'Monseigneur d'Arras gives you the lie and denies that he employed you,' said Fouché to him with a vicious sneer.

- 'Monseigneur d'Arras. Where is Monseigneur d'Arras?' demanded La Croix.
 - 'There!' said Fouché, pointing to me.

La Croix shrugged his shoulders. 'That is not the Comte d'Arras,' he replied contemptuously. 'You are foolish, Monsieur le Duc, you cannot trap me so easily; take me to the comte and I will confront him.'

It was a blow to me although I was half prepared to meet it. It was true, then, that the real D'Arras had despatched his creature La Croix to try and assassinate the Emperor. No wonder that he had found it inconvenient to accompany his sister to France. I braced myself to meet the danger, for here, undoubtedly, at last was a man who knew D'Arras and could unmask me.

I felt a thrill run through my bones, but I forced my lips to smile and my tongue to speak without trembling.

'I congratulate you, duke, on your tool!' I said with a sneer. 'You should, however, have trained him a little better. No doubt the poor man has had me but imperfectly described to him.'

Fouché was livid with rage. 'Sacré!' he growled. 'Away with him, he shall have the rack for this!'

The two spies immediately hustled the poor La Croix, who commenced to protest loudly, from the room.

I had barely time, however, to congratulate myself

on so fortunate an escape, before the curtains beside my bed parted, and to my consternation, from a secret door, cunningly contrived in the wall of the room itself, Napoleon stepped forth into the apartment. He glared at Fouché with unmistakable anger and menace.

'Always plots and conspiracies each day of the week, and always mares' nests,' he cried, snapping his fingers and grinding his teeth in a rage that would have been ludicrous had it not been more than terrible.

'Sire,' stuttered Fouché, all a-tremble, 'I was deceived—that rascal—my zeal—'

'You are a fool!' interrupted the Emperor, harshly. 'Go!'

Fouché stumbled from the room like a whipped dog, his face white and miserable, his jaw hanging.

Napoleon turned to me abruptly. 'Under the circumstances you must pardon me,' he said jerkily. 'Fouché, who picked up this La Croix a week since, extorted from him the story you have heard. I did not doubt you, prince, but to please Fouché—the cursed fool!—I consented to this farce.'

'Sire,' I returned, speaking slowly, 'had I been in your place I would not myself have acted differently. But I venture to hope that now at least you are satisfied of my good faith.'

The Emperor placed his hand on my shoulder; he seemed quite unnerved, and was trembling all

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over. 'I am served by knaves and fools,' he muttered brokenly.

'Let me serve you, sire; I am neither the one nor the other,' I whispered.

He looked me in the eyes. 'Good,' he answered presently, 'I accept,' and he offered me his hand.

Bending low I pressed his hand to my heart, and that is the one action of my life of which I am utterly ashamed. I felt myself a Judas, and nothing has been able to remove the sting from my mind. It is an incident such as this which makes the trade of a spy the most despicable of all.

CHAPTER XIV

HOMEWARD BOUND

WE set out from St Cloud for Boulogne about eight o'clock in the evening. Napoleon with his aide-decamp and Marshal Ney (who had arrived during the day from Italy) occupied one carriage; the Crown Prince, Clarisse and myself the second, while a third carried my sister's maid and the Emperor's attendants.

We were escorted by a mere half-dozen dragoons, fine riders on fine horses, under command of a glittering captain, who twirled his moustache constantly and at every opportunity proudly displayed the Iron Cross of the Legion upon his breast.

Ségur had been sent forward earlier in the day to notify Soult of the Emperor's approach. We halted for supper and to change horses at the little hamlet of Surconne an hour before midnight, and it was there that I had intended to make arrangements which would delay the Prince's journey for a day at least.

But my pet goddess, Fortune, willing to save me all trouble in the matter, threw me a favour with

unlooked-for liberality. The drug was in my pocket, but occasion for its use never transpired. A full hour before our halt the Prince commenced to complain of sickness in the chest and violent pains in his head. Twice we were compelled to arrest the cavalcade in order to minister to his sufferings. He seemed then to revive, but on arrival at the hamlet he was plainly very ill indeed.

Clarisse behaved very prettily. She even besought the Emperor, with tears in her eyes, to allow her to stay behind and minister to the sick man, but in my character of heavy brother I pointed out the impossibility of such a proceeding. But I thanked my stars that the Empress had not provided my sister with a chaperone, for I half believe that the witch was serious in her request. After some delay we took the road again, the Emperor having decided to leave an aide-de-camp to look after the Prince.

We arrived at Boulogne about noon of the next day, after an otherwise uneventful but wearisome journey, passed for the most part by us all in sleep.

We found the whole town in a state of frantic excitement, for Ségur had informed Marshal Soult that the Emperor contemplated an immediate descent upon England, and that great soldier, in his hilarious joy, had imparted the news to his officers, and they in turn to the men.

Soult himself met us in the market-square, and the

moment Napoleon descended from his carriage a mighty shout of 'Vive l'Empereur!' was uttered by ten thousand troops, who crowded the place in utter defiance of all discipline. But the sound of that cry was but a signal. Already half the vast army of invasion, some one hundred and sixty thousand men in all, had been embarked, and hearing the cheers of their comrades on shore there went up from the fleet a thunderous outburst of vivas which might have been heard for many miles around. The very earth reverberated and shook with that tremendous flood of sound, which rolled and pealed about us like concerted salvoes of artillery.

The whole thing put me in a wonder at the extraordinary power it evidenced that this strange little man must possess over his army. I had heard that the soldiers of France worshipped him idolatrously, and indeed had met with some instances of individual devotion; but I confess that this greeting put me quite out of conceit with all previously-conceived opinions, for I had taken it as granted that reports had exaggerated by one half at least.

And Napoleon himself? I watched him narrowly, expecting to find him a little overwhelmed with the pride of the moment. On the contrary, the little man appeared enraged at his reception. His eyes glittered wickedly and he pointed a menacing finger at the troops who thronged about his carriage.

'What do these men here?' he asked of Soult,

snapping his teeth together as he spoke with a doglike snarl.

His words were plainly heard by all, and never have I seen such an instant and marvellous change pass over the faces of a multitude.

Grey-bearded faces, the faces of boys, of raw recruits, of bronzed veterans, all alike, one and all, a second before alight with joy and enthusiasm, became, as if touched with an enchanter's wand, disconcerted, downcast, pale. A rabble of ten thousand eager, excited soldiers was transformed by the half-dozen words, the angry gesture of one little man, into a crowd of schoolboys who had been caught stealing apples.

Soult himself blushed and stammered like a fool.

'Sire, the—it—I—' and halted without a word.

Napoleon scorched him with a look, then turned to the soldiers, who were faltering in blank dismay.

'My children, get you to your duties!' he shouted sternly.

As if by magic the rabble melted away, and in a few seconds the market-square was deserted.

'Sire,' said Soult, suddenly finding his tongue, 'the fault, if there be any, is mine. We have waited so long to strike those English, and the news is so fresh. I had not the heart to prevent my brave fellows from welcoming their petit caporal as they love to call your Imperial Majesty!'

Napoleon smiled with such complete good humour

that I was unable to suppress the suspicion that he had before assumed an anger which was not quite sincere.

'Ah, well, marshal,' he answered, 'let us proceed within doors. There is much we have to do.'

And there was much. His Majesty advised me to stay in my own room, for he wished my identity to remain secret, as he tersely phrased it, 'lest news of your mission should leak out and precede you to England, m'sieur; that is, should we decide to accept your services.'

I had little doubt, however, but that Napoleon had already made up his mind on that score. Still, it suited me to do his bidding, for there were many aristocrats in his army who must have known D'Arras, and I feared above all things a chance encounter. As it transpired, however, I ran very little risk, for not only was my face still almost completely covered with bandages, but my name and coming had been kept quite secret, and I doubt if even Lablache had heard of my arrival, for I feel sure, had he known, he would have found a means of approaching to pay his respects to my sister.

All that afternoon Clarisse and I spent in devising plans for her escape. Mine appeared to be made easy, but hers was more difficult. Finally we determined that her maid should dress in her clothes and she should don herself the boy's costume which I had prepared for her. Then, when the time came, we

should proceed boldly together to the ship which was to take me to England, she masquerading as a page or a lackey, and thereafter trust to the very audacity of the plan, and the confidence reposed in me, to get through safely.

It was a mad idea and possessed many weak spots, as, for instance, Napoleon might accompany me to wish my sister farewell, in which case we should have to trust too much in the discretion of the maid (an artful minx, by the way), and, of course, if she should allow her face to be seen it would mean discovery and destruction. But it was the best plan we knew how to make and we were forced to adopt it faute de mieux.

The Emperor spent the day in reviewing his troops and supervising the completion of their embarkation, a gigantic task which nevertheless by nightfall was finished. Returning then to the hotel he sent for me and curtly commanded me to have everything in readiness to sail by eleven o'clock that very evening.

I tremulously inquired as to the ship which was to transport me across the Channel, and learned to my delight it was the *Cuckoo*, the very boat which had brought Clarisse and me to France.

Ten minutes afterwards I had sought for and found the inn named Louis d'Or, at which place the master of the *Cuckoo* had bidden me inquire for him. The landlord, who looked a ruffian, and smelled horribly of garlic, pretended at first to know nothing of John Masters, but a liberal tip refreshed his memory, and on promise of a further donation he engaged to have Mr Masters in waiting for me there by nine precisely.

Clarisse and I dined with Napoleon at seven. How we got through the meal I do not know; I was on pins and needles with anxiety and yet forced myself to appear perfectly at ease. The Emperor kept plying me with questions all relating to England and my mission, and he seemed disposed to keep us talking long after the meal was done.

Clarisse, however, saved the situation. She suddenly broke into tears and sobbed, 'Oh, you are going to your death, Henri; I shall never see you more!' Then she ran from the room weeping unconstrainedly. I begged the Emperor's permission to follow her, which he gave with a shrug. I found her laughing with excitement. 'Was it not clever of me?' she cried.

I however was distracted to get her away, for needless to say I had changed my plan. I now determined to get her on board the *Cuckoo* at once and let her wait for me there. I quickly ordered her to get the maid changed, and herself, waiting meanwhile in a fever of impatience without.

Soon she hurriedly bade me enter, and in spite of the anxiety which consumed me I could not forbear to stand and gaze at the transformation in sheer de-

light. As a girl, Clarisse was charming; as a boy, she was simply adorable. She had tucked her glorious hair into a jersey cap, and oh, how pretty was her form so generously revealed to me! I could have lingered on for ever revelling in her blushes, her charms, her new-found bashfulness, but time forbade. maid was tricked out in all the mistress's cast-off finery. and appeared to wonderfully enjoy the masquerade. I promised her a large sum if she carried the matter off properly, but her face, though pretty, was not one to inspire over-confidence, therefore I locked the door upon her when we left. I marched boldly forth into the street. Clarisse at my heels, but we met no one except the sentry, and him we passed without suspicion. We found John Masters awaiting us impatiently. When he saw me he uttered a cry I could have sworn was of pure delight, though why he should have been pleased to see me I could not guess. listened to the tale I had invented to satisfy his scruples with regard to the passage to England of my lackey with frank impatience, and agreed to my request without question once he was assured that I, too, was to make the journey. Indeed, he displayed such a pretty anxiety to have my company that I felt vaguely alarmed, more especially as the rogue showed no disposition to bargain with me, but greedily swallowed the first bait of money I offered him

However, I had no choice left but trust to him and

leave Clarisse in his charge. I felt comforted, however, with the reflection that I had given her a pistol, and she assured me she was versed in use of the weapon. I returned to my room at the inn without encountering the slightest opposition. I heard Napoleon's voice in colloquy with Soult as I passed his door. But I took care to make no sound, and gained Clarisse's room without accident. I found the maid as I had left her, admiring herself in a mirror. But I soon cut that short and spent an hour in teaching her to weep. The minx seemed to learn her lesson best with my arms about her. Well, the game was not all unpleasant for she was comely, but I would not have had Clarisse witness the performance for a thousand worlds. I certainly poured a hundred compliments into the maid's greedy ears, and I cannot be sure, yet I believe I kissed her once or twice, but that was by way of business, and surely there was excuse for it.

I think when Napoleon at last bade me to him she was won completely over and would not have cared to fail me, but I dared not be sure, and therefore locked the door again.

Napoleon was seated at a table littered with maps and papers. He inquired curtly after my sister.

I shrugged my shoulders. 'She is desolate, poor thing. She fancies I will be killed. However, I have assured her that your Majesty in any case will guard her welfare.'

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'I promise it to you,' said Napoleon, with a kind smile, 'but let us not consider so disagreeable a conclusion; you will return, count, or if not, you will remain in England as its master.'

'Then you have decided?' I cried out, affecting extravagant delight.

'That you will be first Governor of England.'

'Oh!' I shrugged, pretending disappointment.

'At least for the first,' said Napoleon. 'Later on we shall see.'

I bowed humbly. 'There is one small matter I should mention,' I muttered. 'The fact is, sire, my purse is sadly depleted.'

The Emperor frowned. 'Those who serve me are always amply provided,' he said harshly. 'My servants will place on board the vessel a trunk containing a large sum melted into bars of gold. This you will use in your own discretion to promote our service and for your own needs.'

'I thank your Majesty a thousand times,' I muttered.

The Emperor handed me a sealed letter. 'This,' he said, 'you will deliver to the Marquis de Sevringen whose place in England you will henceforth assume. This' (and he thrust in my hands a second letter unsealed) 'will be your testimonial to those who need it. And now, count, as time presses it were well for you to make your adieux to your sister, and let them be short!'

I bowed low, pocketed the letters and departed.

I declare that minx of a maid wept like a waterspout, and indeed had the andacity to kiss me on the lips. I left her, however, amply consoled, counting the bank-notes which I gave her. I locked her in a third time and on this occasion pocketed the key.

Napoleon himself, with Marshal Soult, escorted me to the wharf, where John Masters in his boat awaited to take me to the sloop. With a final word of advice and caution the Emperor pressed my hand and thereafter stood solemnly regarding me, while the arms of two strong sailors rowed me into the bay. I was inclined to stand up in the sheets and shout aloud for very joy at my wonderful escape, but I reflected that it would be as well to wait, so I waited.

We reached the Cuckoo in safety and the first person to greet me was Clarisse. Ah, my feelings when I saw her! for a horrible thought had kept nagging at me that I should not find her there—a thought induced by the marvellous friendliness of John Masters.

However, all was right, or at least seemed well. The master of the Cuckoo appeared as anxious as ourselves to quit Boulogne. The wind was only slight and the tide had but just commenced to ebb, yet he waited for nothing. He forced all hands to man the sweeps, and we slowly forged out of the harbour. Two hours passed in this dreadful toil, hours which my anxieties converted into years. Every

light we saw my fancy changed to a signal to stop progress and return. Every splash of water against the vessel's side I took for the sound of boats sent in pursuit of us. I sent Clarisse to the cabin, and strode the deck gnawing my lip, one hand on my sword hilt, the other deep in my pocket grasping a pistol by the stock, for I swore that if need arose I would sell my life dearly as may be on that deck, but I would not return to face the vengeance of the Emperor. It was a dark night and the sky was hung with clouds. Afar off we could barely see the lanterns of English warships dim with distance. Boulogne itself was a blaze of lamps, whose bejewelled, multi-coloured flashings sent streamers of light to follow us, dancing and twisting like fairy serpents through the waves.

By the close of the second hour I felt more easy, for now we could not be distinguished from shore, for the *Cuckoo* was painted dark as Erebus and we showed never a gleam. Still the minutes passed and I was almost happy—indeed, on the point of going to congratulate Clarisse—when of a sudden a gun thundered at the port, and signals, the meaning of which I could easily guess, were flashed from the mast-heads of several of the French fleet. One after the other the signals spread, until in a few moments the whole fleet was a blaze of warning, while gun after gun pealed out its stern summons to us to return.

I drew my sword and cocked my pistol without

a second's delay, but to my amaze John Masters cried to his men to continue their work, and we still forged slowly ahead towards England and safety. I could scarcely believe my eyes. I rubbed them to make sure, but yes, it was so, and the men were toiling now as never before, for we actually commenced to leave a wake of foam behind us. Our sails, too, commenced to fill, instead of as before flapping idly at the masts, and soon the sweeps were abandoned and we ran out to sea, breasting the waves right merrily.

The English ships, moreover, made curious by the cannonade, woke from their lethargy and bore down towards us. Soon it became evident that we must pass between two of them at least, and at such close quarters that we must be seen. But I cared not for that, it meant absolute safety; indeed, I felt that it would be the best thing possible, for I knew that the story I could tell would force the Admiral to send me in one of his own ships posthaste to London and the Earl of Chatham; and in spite of John Masters's friendliness I would not have wept to be rid of the *Cuckoo*.

Man proposes, Providence disposes. In this case Providence had entrusted its mission to the hand of John Masters. My meditations were cut short by a coward blow on the head delivered from behind, and I sank into blank unconsciousness.

Thereafter, in a dream, I seemed to hear voices,

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to feel a terrible weight upon my chest, which I wearily strove to raise; I heard the clank of a scabbard trailing on the deck. I heard John Masters address somebody as 'Lieutenant'; I had a vague idea that if I could make this person aware of my existence it would be well for me. There followed—was I dreaming?—the sound of a boat putting off from the ship, then a ringing cheer which woke wild echoes on the waters, then silence and I dreamed no more.

CHAPTER XV

ENGLAND AGAIN

Many hours must have passed before I was aroused to life again, and then but to find myself with a racking headache, superlatively weak and ill. Daylight had come; the world was rocking and pitching horribly, and the air was filled with the sound of bitter sobbing. My brain was dazed, and for long I could not understand my position.

Everything around was strange and unfamiliarly unclean. I seemed to be lying in a narrow closet, a perfect den of evil-smelling filth. Immediately overhead there sloped a coping of heavy black beams, which appeared to be the rafters of a slimy house, and on the boards between loathsome vermin crawled at large. One ugly cockchafer sat glowering at me, rubbing his antennæ with a meditative air that drove me frantic. I thought at first that I must be in hell, and the constant weeping noise irritated me to a perfect frenzy. Soon, however, I distinguished, behind all other sounds, a throbbing, minor note, a lapping mono-

tone, which could only have been the swish of waves against a vessel's side driven by the wind. This brought remembrance with a rush, and thoughts of Clarisse. What had become of Clarisse? With a tremendous effort, which sent a pang through all my body, I moved to one side and the sobbing was explained. Not a yard from me lay my poor Clarisse, bound tightly with great hempen cords. I groaned at the sight, for I, too, was covered with ropes, helpless as a baby, and aching besides in every limb. Luckily neither of us was gagged.

'Clarisse!' I muttered.

She ceased her weeping instantly, and a great light came to her eyes.

'Oh, bon Dieu! I thought you were dead!' she cried in broken accents. 'You have been lying these hours so still, so still.'

'And you-did they hurt you?' I groaned.

'Ah, yes, Caryl, they struck me and used me horribly. It was when the English sailors were coming on board, they brought me and threw me in here with you, and I thought so long that you were dead.'

- 'Where are we?'
- 'They call it the cockpit.'
- 'Why did you not cry out to the English sailors for help?' I asked.
 - 'Ah, dear!' she muttered, 'they put a hateful,

wooden instrument in my mouth, I could not make a sound.'

A very frenzy of anger possessed me on thinking of the indignity the scurvy rogues had put upon this tender girl. Rage gave me back my strength, and with a violent effort I sat up; my arms were bound tightly to my sides with a perfect prodigality of cords; as for my legs, I could scarcely discern them for ropes. Clarisse was just the same. The position appeared quite hopeless, and I groaned in very helplessness. Curiosity as to the reason of the outrage commenced to consume me too. It might mean the revenge of John Masters for the sword-thrust I had given him at Gravesend, but in that case, why should he have included Clarisse in his diabolical attentions? I gave up the problem, and commenced to look about me for means of escape. My sword was still bound to my side; the wretches had evidently been in too great haste to remove it, but I was too trussed up to reach it of myself. What light and air there was streamed in from a narrow slit in the roof above, and by the violent pitching of our prison-house, and the thunderous murmur of the waters, I guessed the Cuckoo was in the midst of a storm.

After a while I rolled over to Clarisse and took a grip with my teeth at the ropes which bound her, in order to test them. To my joy they were not so

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well placed as mine, nor so firmly tied. An hour's ceaseless exertion enabled me to undo one of the knots which fastened her wrists. I gave the poor girl great pain in accomplishing the task, but she bore it bravely, and no one interrupting us I managed at last to free her left hand. Even then she was powerless to use it for a long while, for her poor arm was bloodless and benumbed. I made her rub it up and down my shoulder until the circulation was restored, then taught her how to slip my blade from its scabbard. After that the rest was easy, and in a few minutes I stood up free and able to in turn assist It was long, however, before she could move so roughly had the villains used her. I found in her pocket a powder-flask, but the pistol which I had given her had disappeared. Still I had my sword and the will to use it, and I felt confident as to the issue. The cockpit in which we stood was a horrible little den, crowded on each side with slanting sleeping-berths made of rough wooden frames and sail-There was scarce room to cloth stretched across. turn around, and the vessel tossed so madly that we were constantly knocked about and bruised. I made Clarisse lie down at last, the poor girl being weak and ill, but the place was so filthy that I determined at all hazards to shift our quarters. Cautiously I mounted the half-dozen crazy steps which led to the deck, and with my sword prized open the sliding panel which did duty for a door.

Peering cautiously out a wild sight greeted my The waves around us ran mountains high. Not a sail was in sight. The sky was lowering down upon us, frowning and angry, and bristling with legions of great black driving clouds, while a blinding sleet whistled past incessantly, thick as mist. The Cuckoo carried very little canvas; so far as I could see, only a tiny patch of mainsail, that closely reefed, and a small storm trysail forward, but she was straining and plunging like a maddened thing of life; one moment rearing up until the deck towered above us almost vertical, the next springing forward to the crest of a sea, or diving downwards into a bottomless gulf of water with an awful sickening plunge. About a mile on our lea stretched a long tall headland of grey rock, against which the seas broke with fury indescribable, and in spite of my ignorance of matters nautical I could see that we were in a position of great danger, and that all the Cuckoo's energies were being strained to wear this point. The whole crew was bunched forward in a group, save for two men who were lashed to the wheel, and John Masters, who stood beside them, grasping with one hand a shroud, a speaking trumpet with the other.

I marked all these things through lulls in the driving gusts, but another thing I saw, and that was the moment was propitious for our escape from the cockpit. I called Clarisse to me, and choosing a

period of excessive downpour, which seemed to give the *Cuckoo* besides a moment of ease, we sallied forth and crept like ghosts to the main cabin. 'Twas but a step and we gained it unobserved, but not a second too soon, for next instant the vessel gave a reel which made its every timber shriek and a perfect deluge of water broke over us—a deluge which half flooded the cabin itself and would have swept us like matches from the deck had we been misfortunate enough to have encountered it.

I closed the door, but could not secure it, for bolts there were none, then turned to examine our effects. To my amaze the baggage had not been tampered with; even the Emperor's trunk containing the gold was undisturbed. I suspect that the storm had arisen so quickly as to demand all the attention of the Cuckoo's master, and therein found the reason of his tenderness in respecting our belongings. I discovered, after some examination, that the cabin was furnished with a second door. This I opened without hesitation and found myself in a second apartment, which I could not doubt was John Masters's private kingdom. The wall was hung with pistols and cutlasses, and these I instantly appropriated, so that I was presently a walking arsenal. Those I could make no use of I concealed in the mattress of the other cabin and returned to complete investigations. In a rough cabinet I found many account books and inventories of merchandise, also

a roll of coins, which I left untouched. At the head of the captain's bed was pinned a printed sheet of paper. This, however, I would have passed by with a cursory glance, were it not that the name of my brother Devenac arrested my attention, and in a second I was reading the matter with breathless interest—an interest so deep that I never heeded Clarisse's sudden outcry in the next room.

The paper was a Government proclamation, couched in multiverbose legal phrasing, which, after reciting the assassination of Lord Ernest, Baron Devenac and Earl of Sudmouth, offered five hundred pounds reward for my capture, or for information which should lead to the arrest of me. Carvl Franks. The reason plainly to be inferred was that I was suspected and accused of accomplishing my brother's death. To say that I was astonished would give but a paltry estimate of the feelings which burned within me on reading this precious notice. I was dumbfounded with surprise and horror, and at first sank back against the wall of the cabin, half fainting, almost despairing, while a train of black thoughts crowded on my brain. In a flash I now detected the reason of John Masters having disobeved the Emperor's signal in the harbour of Boulogne; the reason of his extraordinary affectation of friendliness; the reason of his brutal treatment of Clarisse and myself on the approach of the British ships of war. He wished to accomplish his revenge in a truly

devilish fashion, by giving me over to the officers of justice, and at the same time earning the five hundred pounds reward offered for my capture. Therefore he had disregarded Napoleon's summons to return. Therefore he had struck me down and hidden me away prior to being boarded by the English man-of-war's men. Rage came with this thought, and recovery. I swore savagely that I would foil him. At least he would not live to claim the money.

A groan issuing from the adjoining cabin suddenly brought me to a sense of the peril about us. I sprang to the door and peered through. There stood John Masters bending above Clarisse, who lay upon a berth so motionless that I knew she must have swooned. He held a pistol in his grasp, held it by the barrel, and it seemed to me that he had used it to fell Mademoiselle d'Arras.

Uttering a cry I sprang upon him. He was caught, the fool, entirely unprepared, but he was a strong man and fought bravely for his life. I knocked the pistol from his grasp in the first rush, and then entirely overcome with passion, filled only with the lust of hate and blood, I seized him by the neck, and in a second we were sprawling on the floor.

Thinking on the matter in the light of cooler years, a horror has always come to me with the recollection of what followed. The *Cuckoo* still pitched and tossed most dreadfully, turning our bodies over and over as we lay locked in a very

death-grip. The cabin, moreover, was half a foot deep in bilge water and slime. All my plans and purposes were centred in a desperate desire to kill, to rend to fragments the man I grappled with. I thought of nothing else, forgot all else. Struggling with the ferocity of a tiger, I got him as I wished at last, one hand on his throat, his neck across one of my knees, my other pinioning his body. He struck out with despairing energy, but I hardly felt his blows. With my free hand I caught his forehead, and slowly, cruelly, remorselessly pushed back his head across my knee, while the sinews cracked and parted one by one, and soon he lay log still, his neck broken. I arose then, and lifting his body in my arms, staggered to the door and paused. The Cuckoo stood that instant poising on the crest of a monstrous sea. Next instant she dipped down, down, almost erect on an end, into a black abyss. It left me but little to I let John Masters fall, and he rolled, tumbling helplessly along the deck, towards the sailors at the bows, the body gathering way as it proceeded, until with a final, horrid thud it brought up for a second on a piece of broken taffrail, but next instant, aided by a sudden slant movement of the vessel, it slid over into the hungry arms of the sea. One of the sailors made a frantic effort to grasp the corpse as it passed him, and near lost himself in the act.

All saw the end, but none saw me; I knew they

thought it an accident; that the captain had slipped and fallen and so lost his life. It was best so.

I returned to the cabin and Clarisse. She had been stunned by a blow from the butt end of John Masters's pistol, and her fair forehead was disfigured with an ugly, livid bruise. The sight made me wish the Cuckoo's master could return to life, so that I might break his neck again. It was long before I could bring her to—so long indeed that I came to think her gone, and wept and cursed in a manner I take shame to think of now. When her eyes opened I must needs greet again in very joy, and she wept too, so that for a long while we were a pair of children with nought but gladness and love between us.

I think it was the sudden strangely gliding motion of the Cuckoo which gave us our senses back. Indeed we seemed to be in almost smooth water, so easy the vessel rode. A glance gave me the riddle solved. We had rounded the headland and now were entering a pretty and well-sheltered little bay. The rain still poured in torrents, but the waves were nothing compared with those we had battled with in the open sea. An hour later we dropped anchor a half mile from the shore, where nestled a scattered fishing village all built of white stone. I had not the least notion where we lay, but the sailors presently enlightened me. 'Twas the bay of —— on the coast of Essex, and the village we could see was the town

of ——. The sailors seemed extremely surprised to find us at large, but I coolly informed them that John Masters had liberated us, and demanded to see him.

They replied that he had been washed overboard and drowned beyond the headland; and at this I affected great discomfiture. I saw plainly that the master of the *Cuckoo* had not taken his crew into his confidence, wishing, no doubt, greedy rogue, to secure the reward for my capture all to himself. Not one of them guessed at my identity, and I doubt if they had even heard of my brother's murder. They told me that they were far from their intended destination, which it seemed was the port of Dover, and they offered, as soon as the storm should have abated, to put out again to sea and take us there.

This, however, did not suit me, for I shrewdly suspected that John Masters had arranged a reception for me at Dover which would be too warm for my liking. After a few minutes' conversation with Clarisse, to whom I told all, we agreed that the best course to pursue would be the boldest. To land without delay, proceed as quickly as possible to London, and there arrived, tell the whole story to the Earl of Chatham.

The idea that I should be in any serious danger in connection with my brother's murder I never gravely contemplated. It was too absurd a thought to entertain. Why, I had not set eyes on Devenac

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twice in the past ten years, and the last occasion on which we had foregathered was now four years old.

We arrived at my old rooms about midnight next evening. Richards did not recognise me at first, by reason of the bandages which still covered my face, and which I had deemed prudent to retain. But later he overwhelmed me with the delight of his welcome; he actually kissed my hand in an excess of joy, and I did not reprove him, for the rascal was, I believe, sincerely attached to me. I drew him presently to the second chamber in order to give Clarisse an opportunity of becoming a woman again.

'What is this business about Devenac?'

His face became instantly clouded and grave.

- 'What, my lord, you have not heard?' he gasped.
- 'I have heard he was murdered and that I am accused of his death. Why, a reward is even offered—quite a large sum—for my arrest. A chance for you, Richards.'

The lad looked at me indignantly. 'You think me such a dog!' he cried hotly.

- 'No, no, lad, I but jested. But tell me everything. When was Devenac killed?'
 - 'The very night you left, my lord.'
- 'Whew!' I whistled, dismayed, 'and so because I was not to be found they suspected me. Is that it?'

Richards hung his head as if ashamed and did not answer.

- 'Well! What else is there? Is there aught else?' I demanded.
- 'They found the body with a sword stuck in it,' he stammered,
 - 'Well, what of that?' I cried with much impatience.
- 'It was your sword, my lord—the one with the ruby hilt and your name engraved on the blade!' blurted out Richards.
 - 'Liar!' I thundered. 'Impossible!'

But even as I spoke a light broke in on me. I had left that very sword in Mrs Cumming's room the night of the Prince's rout. I was shocked and dismayed beyond words, and hardly attended to the lad's protestations as to the truth of his assertion. Could it be, I asked myself in a whirl of horror, that Mrs Cummings has connived at this crime in order to avenge herself for the slight I had put upon her? No! the idea was too wild and fanciful! Someone, however, must have obtained my sword from her, for two such blades did not exist; and that person, whoever she or he might be, had, without doubt, committed the crime and arranged all things so that the guilt should appear to lie at my door.

'Where was the crime—where was Devenac's body discovered?' I asked suddenly.

'In the porch of this house,' answered Richards, with a shudder.

My God, the genius of the plan! With what diabolical cunning the true criminal had arranged matters so that only I should be suspected. What more natural, indeed, than that I should be accredited as the assassin of my brother? It was widely known that we had long been in open enmity. His body had been found lying before my door, my sword transfixed in his heart, and on that very night I had disappeared from England! One hope only I had left.

'At what time was the body discovered?' I cried sharply.

'At midnight by the watch,' answered Richards.

Ah, I breathed again, for I knew that I could prove an *alibi*. I had been all the afternoon and evening of that day at Greenwich. And yet even that gleam of light faded with reflection, for I remembered my occupation. I remembered that I had spent all that day and night alone on the wharf with Clarisse.

To prove my innocence I would have to depend on my sweetheart; and her evidence, even if believed (and I shuddered to think that it most probably would be discredited), would blacken her fair name. For in the censorious age in which we live no woman's reputation could stand so severe a strain as would be entailed in such an admission. No, I saw clearly I could not depend on a reed so slender. Truly my life was hanging on a thread. All the more need for instant action. I determined to see Pitt at once—at any price—at all hazards.

But first I must arrange a refuge for Clarisse. She could not stay with me a moment longer than was necessary. My thoughts flew to the Duchess of Powers.

Throwing myself before a table I hurriedly scrawled a note.

- 'Richards!' I cried, 'I wish you to escort mademoiselle—'
 - 'Mademoiselle!' gasped Richards.
 - 'Yes, the young lady in the next room.'
 - 'Lady!' gasped the lad, half dazed.

I smiled grimly, remembering that he had seen my companion enter as a boy.

- 'Yes, it is a lady,' I repeated. 'She was compelled to don male attire in order to escape from France—'
 - 'France!' interrupted Richards, again.
- 'See here, my lad!' I said sternly, 'there is no time for explanations, just obey my orders without question. You must escort Mademoiselle d'Arras at once to the house of the Duchess of Powers—'

Richards threw up his hands in horror.

'What!' he cried. 'You have not heard?'

I regarded him severely. 'Heard what? you fool,' I demanded.

'The Duchess of Powers died of poison two days after you left, my lord,' muttered Richards in a

weeping voice. 'Before she died she sent a letter privately to my hand to keep and give you.'

'My God!' I muttered, feeling the whole world swinging round my aching head.

Richards, seeing my emotion, quickly handed me a glass of water, else I believe I should have swooned.

'The letter!' I gasped. 'The letter!'

He took it from his breast with trembling hands. I tore it open, this message from the dead woman, the best and bravest woman the world had ever treated badly. Tears, weak, womanish tears, coursed down my cheeks as I read:—

'Franks, Franks, why have you done this thing? Ah, if you knew how I have loved you, if you knew how I have prayed for you! You have killed two by that one blow, dear. I could have lived without your love. I could have lived and smiled to see you blessed by the love of another, better woman than me. But my heart was wrapped up in you, Franks, you were my idol. God help me! my idol is shattered, I have not the strength to endure more. I can only die, for my heart is broken, my faith in even God is gone!'

The door opened as my eyes faltered at the last word, and Clarisse, a woman again and beautiful as an angel, stood on the threshold, love and sunshine in her face. But the heart of me could only think of the woman who was gone, the sweet woman who had died for a mistake, but whose love was stronger than death. I staggered to my feet and crushed the letter into my breast with a wild, hysterical laugh, I, the cold-blooded gambler—I, that devil Franks.

Clarisse looked at me in terror. 'What is it?' she muttered, her hand at her heart.

'It is a vow I am about to make,' I cried wildly. 'A great vow. Listen to it, Clarisse! The man who killed my brother committed a greater crime still—a crime which must be avenged; I will have his life, Clarisse, by the blood of God I will have his life.' Then I sank down on the floor at her feet, weeping as heaven knows I have not wept since, a tiny baby, I had gone to pour my grief out at my long-dead mother's knees.

An hour later Clarisse and I stood in the library of the house of the great Earl of Chatham, whence we had been admitted, after long delay, by the use of mademoiselle's name, and on the plea that the news she bore affected the safety of England.

CHAPTER XVI

POLITICS

AT the end of a wretched hour, during which we waited, agitated by anxious speech forbidding thoughts, England's great statesman condescended to receive us. A glance at his face made me remorseful at having broken his repose. The noble earl looked pitifully ill and haggard. Though scarcely past the middle age of human life, the cares of a nation had turned him prematurely old. His eyes were bloodshot and weary, and scored beneath with sallow hollows; his lips were bloodless, drawn and stern; his cheeks wan and lined, and of a deathly colour. But for all his apparent sickness his manner was as ever haughty, distant and commanding. I had only once met him face to face before, and it was plain that he did not recollect me.

He greeted Clarisse with a short nod. 'You are Mademoiselle d'Arras?' he said. 'Be seated, miss. And you?' turning to me.

'By the death of my brother, the late Lord Devenac, I am now Earl of Sudmouth,' I answered gravely.

He started back as if in alarm. 'What!' he cried.

'Not Caryl Franks, for whose arrest 1 have offered a reward?'

'The same,' I returned, proceeding quickly, 'but I assure you, my lord, that you and the rest of England have misjudged me, as I shall very soon prove to your satisfaction if you will be so good as to grant me a hearing.'

But he caught at the bell-rope. 'A subterfuge!' he cried. 'You will have ample opportunity to defend yourself at a proper time and place,' and he sharply pulled the rope.

I felt my position growing desperate, but forced myself to calm. 'My lord,' I protested gravely, 'if you arrest me without a hearing you will be doing England a bad service. I have not an hour since returned from France, where I have held converse with no less a person than Napoleon concerning his contemplated invasion of England.'

He paused as if in doubt, eating me with his glance.

'Why should I believe you?' he demanded.

I snatched from my pockets the papers I had gathered, and hastily sorting them, presented to him the letter of credit which Napoleon had given me at Boulogne. 'The handwriting of the Corsican Emperor will not be unknown to you,' I muttered.

Pitt read Napoleon's recommendation slowly, but as he proceeded his face darkened more and more. At last he spoke, and very sternly. 'You offer me strange evidence of your good faith. This letter makes no reference to your brother's death, but it proclaims you (since you are the bearer and no name is therein mentioned) a traitor to your country.'

'My lord,' I answered gravely, 'I repeat that I am innocent of my brother's death. If you will hear me I shall convince you of that, and moreover, that my country possesses than me no more devoted son.'

I think my earnestness surprised and half convinced him, for when servants came in to answer to his summons, he merely called for wine, and presently seating himself motioned me also to a chair.

For a long while he remained silent, seemingly in deep thought, then at last he sighed and said, 'Well, my lord, I am ready to listen to what you have to say.'

I wanted no more, but immediately, in a low, earnest voice, commenced the recital of my adventures, beginning from the very morning Carne Messidor, or the Marquis de Sevringen, had visited my apartments and left his purse behind, and proceeding thenceforward until I had given him the gist of all that had befallen me in France, my escape therefrom and subsequent return to England. I put before him, moreover, all the documents in my possession, relating to, or rather hinting at, the disloyalty of certain Englishmen, not even withholding my brother's letter to De Sevringen. The only items which I did not think fit to disclose to him completely were the

matter of Count d'Arras's connection with Napoleon and the exact manner of the death of the *Cuckoo's* master, John Masters.

The Prime Minister gave me a very patient hearing, only interrupting when I touched upon Lord Melville's treasonable correspondence; to my astonishment he warmly defended Lord Melville, and pressed upon me the fact that the ex-First Lord of the Admiralty had not only failed to commit himself in his letters, but that he could not be accused of treason on the ipse dixit of De Sevringen. I could see, however, that he attached great importance to the despatch which I had rescued from the flames at St Cloud, and he warmly eulogised the manner in which I had conducted myself in France. Moreover, the information which I was able to give him as to the disposition of Napoleon's troops forming the army of invasion, afforded him great satisfaction, together with the news of their contemplated points of landing on the shores of Kent and Suffolk. On hearing this, indeed, he became deeply moved, and asked numerous questions, after I had completed my narration, also on the matter of foreign affairs, and Napoleon's private attitude and publicly-expressed opinion concerning Continental politics, having especial regard to England's just-arranged alliance with Austria and Russia.

On most important details in my story Clarisse was able to bear me out, and Pitt listened to her

remarks with great attention, being sometimes even moved to smile at her bright sallies and witty criticisms on the manners of Napoleon's Court.

The hours wore away in this engrossing converse, and the lamps were paled by morning long before we had finished our discourse. The manner of the great Pitt had grown so kind to me towards the conclusion that a restful sense of security gradually enveloped me, and I commenced to hope that my troubles were at end.

Finally he arose and said, 'My dear Lord Devenac, I have no hesitation in declaring that you have done England a great service. I will even go so far as to say that I think we need no longer fear invasion. Sir Robert Calder will be able to hold Villeneuve in check until Nelson arrives to assist him, and I shall at once arrange that Nelson, who is shortly expected at Gibraltar, shall be warned. For the rest, without Villeneuve Napoleon can by no means raise the blockade of the Channel ports, and I much doubt that he will even attempt the enterprise, now that he suspects your good faith, for he is aware that you are conversant with his plans, and therefore he cannot longer hope to find us unprepared. Your enterprise was a very rash and daring one, but it has terminated with eminent success, and as England's guardian I thank you for what you have undergone in her service.'

I bowed humbly. 'I am glad to merit your lordship's good opinion,' I replied.

'But,' said Pitt, and as he spoke his features, lately animated with a kindly warmth, on a sudden became repressed and stern, 'unfortunately, nothing you have told me much tends to remove the terrible charge from your shoulders of which you are accused. I refer to the assassination of your brother, the late Earl of Sudmouth.'

'My lord,' I said quickly, 'I have not yet spoken fully on that score. It may be true that Devenac's body was discovered at my door, my sword in his heart, but is it not possible that he may have been placed there in such manner by my enemies, in order to accomplish my destruction? I have already assured your lordship that for many hours before his body was discovered I lay in hiding at Greenwich in company with Mademoiselle d'Arras.'

'It is possible,' coldly returned the earl. 'But in this world many things are possible. Remember that your brother's corpse was found upon your doorstep. It is possible that he was despatched in your rooms hours beforehand and carried to the door at midnight, by which time it may have been expected that your escape should have been effected. Many persons hold this opinion, my lord.'

'But,' I cried, indignant at such an insinuation, 'what if I tell you that the sword which spilt his

blood for a whole week prior to the crime was out of my possession?'

'In that case it would be necessary for you to produce ample proof in support of such an assertion,' he retorted.

'In whose hands, then, do you say this sword was?'

'I know not in whose hands it was, my lord, but on the night of the Prince of Wales's rout, now ten days since, I left it in His Royal Highness's sleeping-room at Whitehall, and since then I have not set eyes on it.'

'You would accuse the Prince, then?' asked Pitt, satirically.

For answer I bluntly told him of my encounter with Mrs Cummings and the circumstances under which I had left her. It was a horrid task, for Clarisse listened, her eyes sparkling with anger, but I could not afford to be nice since my liberty, mayhap my life also, hung in the balance. I feel sure that Pitt believed me, and from that moment no longer doubted my innocence, although he went to some pains to pretend the contrary. He affected to only half credit my story, and bitterly ridiculed the idea, even admitting its truth that it would be possible for me to establish a connection between Mrs Cummings, or, indeed, any of the Prince's attendants, and the veritable assassin. It was at this moment that I almost despaired. A silence

fell upon us, and my agitation was so great that although the morning was chill great beads of perspiration burst out on my forehead and trickled down my face like tears. I racked my brain to try and discover one gleam of hope, but the effort was futile, I could think of nothing.

Clarisse broke the stillness. 'Have you a deadly enemy—one who would dare go to all lengths in order to injure you?' she asked.

'The Marquis de Sevringen. Ah!' I gave a loud cry, for on mentioning his name two almost forgotten, dimly-remembered incidents flashed into my memory.

Each concerned the Count d'Arras, brother of Clarisse. I remembered that on the night of the Duchess of Powers's ball, while conversing in the garden with the count, he had astonished me by declaring that De Sevringen was the lover of Mrs Cummings, and that he was even at the very moment we foregathered in dalliance with her.

The second incident was even more ominous. When the Count d'Arras had come to say goodbye to his sister at Greenwich he had addressed, me by my brother's title. Could he then have been cognisant of my brother's death? It might have been a mere accident, a slip of the tongue, but I remembered that he had appeared embarrassed when I corrected him. And, above all, I had seen blood upon his sleeve. Surely he must

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have known; and at that moment my brother's body had not been discovered.

I felt that I had clutched the key of the mystery. Either the Count d'Arras or the Marquis de Sevringen had killed Lord Devenac. Every second increased my conviction. There was not even wanting a more tangible motive than revenge. Had not my brother written De Sevringen the threatening letter which Pitt this moment held in his hand? Having outlived his period of usefulness, and growing dangerous, what more natural than that the marquis should have determined to silence him, and so remove from his path a danger; to remove him as had been done, and so accomplish a double object—safety and revenge!

Pitt and Clarisse watched me in expectant silence as I pieced out the matters in my thoughts.

Soon I turned to them, and in a few terse sentences placed part of my suspicions before them, but for Clarisse's sake I glossed over as much as possible D'Arras's connection with the murder, though I felt in my heart that he was dangerously implicated.

The Earl of Chatham was plainly impressed. 'If it be as you say,' he observed, after a moment's thought, 'no more devilish conspiracy has ever been conceived. But to unmask it, that is the difficulty! It is true I have before me sufficient evidence to warrant the arresting of this precious marquis out of hand. But

that will not assist you. It is unlikely that he would confess be he ever so guilty.'

'My lord,' I cried suddenly, 'you have but lately admitted that I have done our country some little service.'

'True,' he answered, eyeing me inscrutably. 'But my words were "a great service."'

- 'Deserving of reward, my lord?'
- 'Under other circumstances, indubitably.'

'My lord,' I cried impulsively, 'on my word of honour as a man, I am entirely innocent of this horrible crime! I beg you to believe me, and to give me the one chance possible of proving to the world my innocence. More depends upon my request than my life. There is, it seems to me, the fair or ill . carriage of justice resting on the issue. I ask you to consider these things before you answer. moiselle d'Arras has promised to become my wife. Her happiness, I am assured, waits on your word. Is it reasonable to suppose that I would have returned to England had I been a guilty man? Is it reasonable that having returned, and finding myself accused, I should have come straight to you if I were not innocent? Would not I rather, on seeing the overwhelming array of circumstantial evidence against me, have fled to hide myself at the world's end?'

Pitt's face gave no evidence of the thoughts which stirred his brain; his features remained orderly, calm and perfectly controlled, and his eyes never wavered in their searching stare.

'What is it that you require?' he asked, much as one man would ask another the time of the day.

'I would beg of you, my lord, two days' grace,' I answered slowly, 'two days, and if by that time I have not proved my words to you I shall return here and resign my liberty into your keeping.'

'Ah, and what security do you offer that you will not employ this period in arranging your escape from England?'

I felt my anger arising but I forced myself to selfcontrol.

'I offer you a hostage in the person of Mademoiselle d'Arras,' I answered coldly; 'that is, if mademoiselle will grant me such a favour. I assure you, my lord, I would not have quitted France without her, and my life was even more in danger there than here.'

'I accept,' said Clarisse, who had been eyeing me somewhat coldly for some time past, I thought.

' 'H'm!' said Pitt. 'Not so fast, miss. My consent is the more needful, it appears to me. Have you anything else to offer me, young man?'

'Money—I have a considerable sum of money!' I replied disdainfully.

Pitt shrugged his shoulders. 'A very useful commodity in my opinion,' he muttered, 'most useful; but I notice that you have not offered me your word.'

- 'That was surely implied!' I retorted.
- 'I prefer matters to be plainly stated. Well, I am satisfied, but on one condition only. I require your word—your word of honour, young man—that in case I grant your request you will utter no syllable of what you have informed me concerning transactions between France and traitorous Englishmen to any living soul.'
 - 'Until when, my lord?'
- 'Until I grant you permission to the contrary. I require mademoiselle also to join in this promise, and understand, there must be no quibble. Not only must the contract be fulfilled in letter, but in spirit.'
 - 'But the reason of this, my lord?' I stammered.

Pitt favoured me with a black frown. 'Are you in a position to demand reasons?' he retorted. 'Well, I shall give you a reason. For the present, this matter must remain a State secret. There is more in it than meets the eye, and weighty, conflicting interests are involved. We are now fighting France; it is therefore not the time to quarrel amongst ourselves. With these weapons' (and he pointed to the letters I had given him) 'I can fight better in the dark than in the light; traitors are no longer dangerous when their treachery is known. Instead of attempting to bring these wretches to the scaffold, and most probably failing in the effort, I shall force them to aid me in properly directing the ship of State,'



I bowed with great reverence. 'I thank you humbly, my lord, for your kind confidence. I give you my promise unreservedly.'

'And you, miss?' said Pitt, turning abruptly to Clarisse.

'I promise,' she replied.

The earl nodded. 'Then I need no longer detain you, my lord. You are free to go. Miss will stay, of course, with me. She shall be well looked after.'

'Then I wish your lordship good morning,' I remarked, hoping that he would give me a moment with Clarisse.

But apparently he had no such intention, for he stood there imperturbable as the table, plainly waiting to be rid of me. We bowed to each other four separate times with all the gravity of Chinese mandarins, then, perceiving he would not budge, I made a virtue of necessity and approached Clarisse.

'Good-bye, dear, for the present,' I whispered.

She answered coldly, 'Good-bye, m'sieur.'

I stooped to salute her cheek, but she drew back with face averted, and gave me only the tips of her fingers.

'What is the matter?' I stammered, cast in confusion at her unusual coldness.

'Nothing,' she replied; then, in a whisper of

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passionate scorn, 'You had better go to your Mrs Cummings!'

But this was past reason, and I lost my temper.

'I shall!' I answered hotly, and strode out of the room.

CHAPTER XVII

I AM ARRESTED

WELL, I went to see Mrs Cummings, prepared in sheer exasperation for anything, willing if necessary to make love to her. The lady had, however, crossed my name from her book of favours. granted me an audience, it is true, but merely for the purpose of exhibiting to my appreciation the fine art to which she had reduced the practice of indifference. She pretended to believe that my call was one of formal courtesy. She gave me tea, spoke of the weather, the war and her megrims, but with resolute skilfulness declined to be drawn into any more intimate converse. The Prince's last rout was a reminiscence of the Dark Ages which had almost slipped her memory, indeed, she did not recollect my having been there at all.

I spoke out bluntly at last but she laughed in my face. 'Ha, ha! Franks, you'd better take that story to the Prince. Did it really happen? We must have all been tipsy.'

'It happened!'

'La, and you'd have none of me! When did you turn Joseph? Oh, this is too good! Ha! ha! ha! You'll be renamed for this, Franks. Hawks, how George will laugh at you!'

I flung out of the room in a temper, but her termagant laughter followed me, and the taunt, 'Good-bye, Joe,' from the stairs.

My next call was at D'Arras's lodging-house. He resided in elegant apartments in Berkeley Square. I was constrained to wait near an hour for him, for I did not care to send in my name, but he came out at last, and, judging from the expression of his face, was none too pleased to see me.

'Mon Dieu!' he cried aghast. 'But this is foolish of you, milord. Do you not know that your life is in danger?'

'My life in danger?' I repeated, affecting surprise, for I wished to play with him. 'What can you mean?'

'In danger. Mon Dieu! Je pense que oui. Why, a reward is even offered for your arrest!'

'And pray, for what reason, Prince?' I demanded.

He changed colour, and appeared uneasy, but presently replied with a shrug, 'It is on account of your brother's death, milord. They imagine that you have killed your brother.'

'Who dares to imagine such a thing. You, Prince?'

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He spread out his hands. 'Not I, milord; but the authorities—indeed all England!'

I looked him full in the eyes. 'But yourself, count, you do not believe this thing of me?'

'I—I?' he stammered uneasily. 'Of course, my lord. You—I—if you say—'

I laughed bitterly. 'Quite so, Prince, I understand. But permit me to observe that you have not yet asked concerning your sister.'

'Ah, bon Dieu! the thought of your danger has driven all things else from my mind. But the dear little petite Clarisse, you left her safe and well?'

- 'Quite safe and quite well, count.'
- 'And she was well received, but that, of course, you do not know. Did you accompany her far upon her journey?'
- 'As far as St Cloud, Prince. I carried out our agreement perfectly.'
 - 'How can I thank you sufficiently?'
- 'By paying me the sum agreed upon, your Highness.'
- 'Ah'm, ah'm! It was five hundred pounds, I think.'
- 'Your Highness's memory is at fault. One thousand pounds was the fixed amount.'
 - 'Surely, milord? So large a sum?'
 - 'That was the amount,' I repeated coldly.

He was evidently very uneasy. 'Ah'm!' he

stammered. 'My dear Lord Devenac, I must—the fact is—I must ask you to give me a day or two. During your absence my luck has never been so bad. All the week I have been losing, and last night—ah'm!—last night I was cleaned out, quite cleaned out!'

I shrugged my shoulders. 'You are evidently unaware of my position,' I observed. 'It is imperative that I should have the money at once.'

'Ah'm, a few hours, milord, but a few hours and I shall arrange. If you would be so good as to call again—say at noon.'

'So that your Highness may have an opportunity of preparing for my arrest meanwhile?' I suggested with an acid smile.

He was so immediately insulted that I felt sure I had discerned his plan, and in spite of his indignant protestation I felt for him a profound contempt. Had he not been Clarisse's brother I should have paraded him then and there, but under the circumstances I merely bowed, smiled sweetly, and looking him in the eyes asked him, in the most friendly manner possible,—

'My dear Prince, can you tell me where I may find De Sevringen?'

He gave me a sharp glance. 'I expect him momentarily.'

'Ah,' said I, 'then with your permission I shall await his arrival here; I am most anxious to see

the marquis, Prince; and it will be best, I think, for me to meet him in your company. There is a private difference between us which I wish to have definitely settled, but also I have a question to propound him which concerns, I fear, yourself.'

He was staring at me in dismay, very plainly distracted by the sweetness of my manner. 'What is this question?' he muttered.

- 'Oh, a trifle, Prince, a mere trifle.'
- 'But I should be glad to hear it now.'
- 'You are impatient, Prince. I think we had better wait for the marquis, who has a certain claim to be present when I propound this question.'

But His Highness grew excited. 'You will do me a great favour if you will tell me at once,' he urged.

- 'But the marquis may be here any moment,' I objected, playing with my quarry in a manner which delighted me.
- 'He may be detained,' said the count. 'He is often late in keeping his appointments.'
- 'Then,' I replied with a shrug of indifference, 'rather than keep you waiting, Prince. The matter, as I have observed, is a trifle, but nevertheless something depends upon your answer to this question—"Who was it assassinated my brother, the late Lord Devenac? You, or the Marquis de Sevringen?"'

The Prince bounded up from his chair as though he had been shot, and stared into my face, his own grown pale as death. 'What do you mean?' he gasped.

I smiled, and returned with perfect composure, 'Exactly what I have said. Either the marquis or you killed Lord Devenac. It really doesn't matter to me which; in fact, I am exceedingly indebted to the actual criminal, but unhappily one of you will be hanged for the crime. The proof is clear against the pair of you, since you were in company; the only thing which is not certain is which of you actually struck the blow. I am bound, however, to tell you that Pitt, Earl of Chatham, believes yours to have been the hand, for he knows De Sevringen to be a coward. Of you I am glad to say, Prince, he has another and more complimentary opinion.'

The Count d'Arras was, to speak quite truly, trembling in every limb. It was the first time that I had ever witnessed such a display of emotion, and the spectacle was therefore not without interest.

- 'Pitt!' he gasped hoarsely, 'the Prime Minister!'
- 'The same,' I replied, smiling from sheer amusement.
 - 'You appear concerned, Prince.'

He fought desperately to appear at ease. 'Bah!' he cried, 'the accusation is monstrous, absurd!'

I am one of those who, to gain what is required, am ever prepared, should occasion arise, to risk my all upon a cast of the dice. Such an occasion appeared to me the present. I shrugged my shoulders. 'Well, Prince, to tell you the truth, I

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have just come from Pitt to warn not only you, but the Marquis de Sevringen. It is true that against the marquis I entertain some grudge—and indeed I suppose I should bear malice against the pair of you for the very clever manner in which you disposed of my brother's body so that it might seem that his death lav at my door-but after all your pretty plot has failed, utterly failed, and therefore why should I harbour bitter feelings against those who have rendered me, even though unwittingly, so signal a service as to make my fortune? While Devenac lived I was a pauper, an outcast. Now I am Earl of Sudmouth with a yearly rent roll of half a hundred thousand pounds. You perceive I am frank with you. What, you shrug your shoulders! You perhaps imagine I am deceiving you. Bah! my dear count, do not deceive yourself! I have been in London now two whole days, I have passed through the streets unmolested. It is true the reward for my arrest is still proclaimed, you would therefore ask-Why was not I arrested? Shall I tell you the reason? Because there was a witness of your crime who, two days ago, informed the authorities of the fact. Since then they have made diligent inquiries, and have procured a marvellous string of evidence, which has had the effect of making manifest my innocence, your guilt. They did not at once withdraw the proclamation and warrant for my arrest. Why? They wished to lull

you to security while they forged the chains which are to hang you. Shall I tell you what these chains are? They have ascertained that on a certain night some time since I left behind me, in the care of a certain Mrs Cummings, the very sword which was found stuck through the body of my late lamented brother. Ah, well and then! Well, Mrs Cummings this morning has confessed that, on the evening preceding the crime, she entrusted this sword to the care of her lover, the Marquis de Sevringen - of course, never guessing for what purpose it would be used. Do you wish to hear more—the details of how you and the marquis slaughtered my poor relative, and carried his body to my door, and there left it, with my sword in his heart? That, if you wait, you will hear from the lips of the witness to your crime. You will moreover hear me (and I shall be forced to bear witness against you) swear that when you came to bid us farewell at Greenwich there was blood upon your ruffles. And, my dear count, who do you think will substantiate my testimony? But that is an unfair question, seeing that you could never guess its answer in a hundred years. I shall not, therefore, keep you in suspense, but tell you that the name of this person is the same as your own-in fact she, for this person is a woman, is no one else than your own sister.'

He had been staring at me through this long

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speech with the eyes of a hunted beast, but on my last words he uttered a cry which was almost a scream.

'My sister!'

I laughed grimly. 'No less. And you can guess with what distress she would appear against her brother, Prince. I confess that it is mademoiselle's implication in the business which has added a motive to those others that primarily actuated me in warning you.'

'My sister is in France!' screamed the count.

'Pardon me,' I returned. 'She did not care for France. She did not approve the husband whom your kind foresight had provided for her. She' (I bowed) 'did me the honour to prefer a matrimonial alliance which I was able to suggest for her acceptance, and therefore she returned with me to England.'

'Mon Dieu! you are lying to me!'

'My dear Prince, you forget yourself,' I said sternly. 'For those words, under other circumstances, I would inevitably have killed you; but relatives should not quarrel, and very soon we shall be brothers!'

'Sang de Dieu, what is it that you are saying?'

I bowed low. 'Your sister has done me the honour to select me, your very humble servant, Prince, as her husband. With your kind consent we shall be married immediately.'

He glared at me, one marvellous admixture of rage, fear and rabid astonishment.

'My sister marry you!' he gasped.

I bowed again. 'Unless you prefer to be hanged, Prince; that is the only thing which will keep us apart. For in that case I must admit I should not welcome the alliance. To marry the sister of a convicted murderer! Oh, no; you should remember that I have now a rank to support, a position to maintain. It would be quite impossible, your Highness, much as I esteem your sister, much as I would otherwise welcome the connection.'

My cool insolence, as I had foreseen, overawed him, he dared not protest; it was as much as he could do to stammer out,—

'My sister, I must see her!'

'Unfortunately!' I shrugged, 'that is impossible; she is at present detained by the Earl of Chatham at his house, and were he to see you, all chance of your escape would be destroyed. I should warn you, Prince, that within the day a proclamation will be issued closing all the ports of England, and a warrant also for your arrest.'

'Oh, why does not De Sevringen come?' cried out the count, in a very agony of doubt and fear.

'Probably he is already arrested,' I returned

coolly. 'You see I was able, through my visit to France, to supply Pitt with much valuable information. Besides' (here I took from pocket De Sevringen's purse and skull) 'I don't mind admitting to you, count, that this has been in my possession for some time. I daresay you have heard of my duel with the marquis and its cause! Ah, well, the marquis partially told the truth on that occasion. I did not lure him to my rooms to rob him, but he visited me there of his own accord, and left these articles behind. This purse, I may inform you, though empty now, contained at that time many incriminating papers, much treasonable correspondence and other matters, and, as was my duty, I some time since placed all these things in the hands of the great Pitt. Ah! by the way, one of the papers in that very purse was a letter from Devenac (no doubt you have seen it, count) which disclosed a treasonable connection between him and De Sevringen, and which formulated a distinct threat. I believe Pitt relies on that letter to show the motive which animated you, or the marquis, or both (I am open to correction in minor details, count), in despatching my poor unfortunate brother.'

On this D'Arras gave a groan and threw out his hands. 'I did not kill Lord Devenac,' he cried. 'I swear I did not.'

'Then,' I shrugged, 'it was your friend, De Sevringen?'

'Ah, bon Dieu! I implored him not to do it. It was horrible!'

'And yet,' I said sternly, 'you assisted the marquis to carry Devenac's body to my door so that the crime might be fastened on my shoulders.'

'Mon Dieu! no, I am not such a fiend!' cried the count, trembling with emotion.

'Then explain the blood on your coat, Prince. The evidence is very much against you.'

He shuddered. 'He was—he was—De Sevringen kil— *Mon Dieu!* what am I saying?' and he glared at me like a trapped rat.

I faced him, stern as fate. 'Speak out!' I commanded. 'Remember your life is in my hands.'

He gave a groan and stared about him as if imploring assistance, then muttered, 'It was not me; I swear it. De Sevringen took a house in the alley behind your lodgings and wrote Lord Devenac to come there at a certain hour, in order to receive a large sum of money which had been promised him. As he entered the door the marquis, who was waiting in the passage, stabbed him, and he fell back on the step—'

'It was then you were observed,' I interrupted sharply, the lie springing readily to my lips. 'You, count, were seen bending over the body.'

The count was livid as a corpse 'I bent down

to see if he were alive. I was horrified!' he stammered hoarsely.

'No doubt,' I replied with sarcasm, 'it must have been a great surprise to you! Well, I suppose you helped to carry him inside, eh?'

He answered with a shudder of horror, 'Mon Dieu! I cannot sleep o' nights for thinking of his face.' he cried.

'Your nerves must be in a bad state,' I observed affectedly. 'Try some tonic; they say iron is good for such cases.'

He looked at me in amaze. 'And you can jest!' he cried.

'Well, really, count, you see the matter does not concern me, except that I am served by it. As I told you before, I am your debtor, or rather De Sevringen's, to the tune of a title and a big income. However, let us now talk of your escape. This story of yours, I tell you frankly, will not be believed. At best you will be accounted an accessory, and will incur the same punishment as the actual murderer. We must arrange for your escape. As a fact, I have already done something towards that end. I have engaged the *Cuckoo* to be in readiness at Dover to take you where you will—to France or Belgium. What say you?'

It was a lie, of course, but a pardonable one, I dare aver.

The count, however, grasped eagerly at this hope.

'A thousand thanks!' he gasped. 'I shall at once make ready.'

'One moment!' I interrupted. 'Before you go, I must ask you to give me a written consent to my marriage with your sister.'

'Sang de Dieu!' he cried, 'you are serious?'

'Never more so!' I returned coldly. 'Without that you will not move a step if I can prevent you, and I think I can. Moreover, you had better write me a full account of my brother's murder, so that I may protect myself thereby from Pitt's anger; for he will be sure to suspect that I have warned you, and in excuse I must be able to at least urge your innocence.'

'But De Sevringen!' he gasped.

'Never mind him!' I muttered angrily. 'He is most likely by this past human aid!'

The count made not the least demur; he was near frantic with fear and excitement. He dragged me to his inner room, where he commenced hurriedly to write at my dictation; but every second minute he interrupted to ask some disjointed question relative to the details of his flight or the probabilities of its success.

I would never have suspected the man of being such a craven; he usually bore himself bravely enough. However, at last the task was done, and I had tucked away his confession and his consent to my marriage safely in my doublet pocket.

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I confess to feeling a large amount of satisfaction at my own cleverness just then. But was wise as a serpent. I not only concealed my feeling, but kept my victim on the qui vive of alarm. While his servants packed what things he needed, I passed the time in instilling fresh terrors into his troubled soul by muttering dark hints and innuendoes, and continually urging haste.

The fact was, I wished to get the count out of London; whether he left England or not I did not care. All the better if he did, for, after all, he was Clarisse's brother. But what I really wanted was to isolate De Sevringen. I was now fortified with D'Arras's confession and I made no doubt but that with it I could bring the marquis to justice.

What I feared more than all else was that De Sevringen might come to call upon the count before he had set out upon his journey, and while I was still in his company, in which case I dare not think on what might have transpired, for the marquis was not only clever as a snake, but unscrupulous as the devil, and I was alone in a house full of Frenchmen.

However, De Sevringen did not arrive, and in less than an hour I had packed off my future brother-inlaw in a chaise and four at desperate speed on his way to Dover.

God save him! I never set eyes on him after, and I am told he died last year, in all the odours of

sanctity, at a small city in the United States of America, by name of Philadelphia.

With what feelings of joy did I not hurry to the house of the Prime Minister. Even the forty minutes that he kept me waiting in his ante-room did not serve to cool my bubbling spirits. I felt elated as a boy who has successfully survived his first encounter on the greensward and winged his opponent besides.

The earl was busy with affairs of State, I was informed, and that he had much to do I cannot doubt, for my own hands had lately brought him work enough to fill his leisure moments.

He sent for me at last and I entered to receive a shock.

His countenance to the gravest degree was cold, cynical and stern. Moreover, he received me well attended. His secretary stood beside him, and in the room were two officers of police. I confess to feeling my blood turn of a sudden cold in my veins, but I reflected that in my pocket was the count's written confession, and so I plucked up courage.

Pitt's greeting was, to say the least, disconcerting.

- 'You are bold to return here, my lord!'
- 'But!' I cried in amaze, 'I engaged to do that thing.'

His lips twisted in a cruel smile. 'What!'

'You have the effrontery still to persist in your absurd and desperate story. Well, I cannot longer assist you. In return for services—undoubted services

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—rendered to England, I gave you a chance—a chance to escape. It were better for you to have followed the example of the woman, your confederate, and to have improved that chance. Now I cannot longer shut my eyes to the fact of your presence here; the warrant must take effect.'

'What does your lordship mean?' I demanded hotly.

He gave me a cold and suspicious glance.

'I mean that you are under arrest,' he said sternly. 'Officers, do your duty!'

The two officers immediately approached and laid hands on my shoulders.

'I arrest you in the name of His Majesty the King!' said one, producing handcuffs as he spoke.

But I shook off their clutch, and snatching D'Arras's confession from my pocket sprang forward.

'At least, my lord, read that!' I cried excitedly, thrusting the paper under his nose.

Pitt nodded to the officers to wait, and cursorily glanced down the pages. His face, however, never changed expression, and it soon became plain that he attached no importance to the document which had cost me so much trouble to obtain. When he had finished he tossed it carelessly to his secretary.

'You pretend that this is genuine?' he sneered.

'I swear it!' I cried, consumed with rage and indignation.

He shrugged his shoulders. 'Even were it so,'

he returned coldly, 'it is valueless as evidence to assist you, unless the count chooses to appear and substantiate this story, and he is scarcely likely to come forward and incriminate himself. I presume he has left England. Eh?'

'He is now on his way to Dover,' I muttered hoarsely, for by this I was commencing to despair and to feel something like fear knocking at my heart. I had relied all along upon Pitt's friendship, and now, for some inexplicable reason, he behaved as my bitterest enemy. I could not, strive as I would, understand him or more than guess wildly at the cause of his change of front.

'Ah, well,' said Pitt, after a moment's thought, 'we shall see at the trial; you shall there have ample opportunity for defending yourself; that is all I can promise you. Officers, remove the prisoner!'

'One second,' I cried suddenly. 'Your lordship referred just now to a woman, my confederate, having escaped. Did your lordship refer to Mademoiselle d'Arras?'

Pitt sneered in my face.

'You are very innocent, my lord! and, permit me to say, very impudent! Mademoiselle d'Arras, or whatever else she may choose to call herself, or you to call her, honoured my house with her presence but a single hour and then flew like a bird from my window. I confess, however, that I was a fool to have expected aught else!'

This news utterly confounded me. I was ready to despair before, but now I was desperate indeed.

The officers came forward to arrest me, but in a second I sent them reeling back and drew my sword.

'You force me to this, my lord,' I muttered grimly, and striding swiftly to the wall I placed myself on guard.

'Since you have decided to murder me, I had as lief die here like a gentleman.'

Pitt raised his hand.

'Be advised, give up your sword,' he said sternly if you are innocent that is not the way to prove it.'

'I have no other way left,' I retorted recklessly. 'You order my arrest and allow the real criminal to escape. What hope is there for me? It is murder, nothing else! Well, at least I'll sell my life dearly, and' (I smiled mockingly) 'if your lordship will deign to watch proceedings, I can promise you some pretty sword-play.'

The earl frowned. 'You are mistaken,' he said. 'I have already ordered De Sevringen's arrest on another matter; as for the Count d'Arras, he cannot escape, the ports have been blocked since daylight. If you are not a fool you will cease this bravado and submit to the inevitable.'

As he spoke he advanced, and pushing his secretary, who sought to stay him, on one side, and fearlessly placing himself at the point of my blade, held out his hand. 'Your sword,' he commanded.

I could have spit him as he stood, and had the heart to do it, he had treated me so badly. But something held my hand. The consideration of his frail and wasted form, perhaps, or the absolute dauntlessness of his bearing. Perhaps, too, the dominating message of his eyes. I cannot tell.

For a long moment we gazed at each other, and I think the Prime Minister knew that he was very near to death. With one thrust I could have sent him to the shades, and I was past the power of reasoning. But he did not falter in so much as a muscle, and presently he spoke again.

'Your sword.'

Two words, whose imperiousness was unimaginably severe. It was a new thing for me to be ordered like a lackey, and no other man could have done it with a like result. Not even Napoleon himself, for whatever are my failings, weakness of will is not one of them.

I hesitated. He who hesitates is lost.

In a quarter of an hour I was lodged in Newgate, which is, believe me, a most unpleasant—a damnably unpleasant—place.

CHAPTER XVIII

NEWGATE

IT was an apology for a room that I was given for a sleeping-chamber—a matter of nine feet by seven, fenced on six sides with solid stone—straw for a couch, and that none too clean, while air was grudgingly admitted through a slit of a window scarcely big enough for a cat to creep out of, yet, nevertheless, defended with a horrible iron grille.

'Ah, my lord!' I soliloquised, addressing myself in frank apostrophe, 'you are at length laid by the heels in very proper fashion. Here is punishment fit for all your youthful follies, faults and crimes!'

In truth a most unsavoury apartment. I wore out my energy in pacing up and down its narrow limits until, weary to death, I cast myself on the floor, discarding the filthy straw, and slept.

The grating of the lock awakened me. 'Twas but a turnkey with my supper—a mess of porridge, a half loaf of last week's bread, and a jar of water.

The unfeeling gaoler never opened his lips, but set the victuals down and left me with my reflections, my supper and the dark. I could not eat at first, but spent an hour or two cursing fate and Pitt with promiscuous ill-will. Then reminded by appetite that for many hours I had not broken fast, I was glad enough to gnaw the bread, but the porridge sickened me, also my thoughts.

What the devil had become of Clarisse? Why had she departed from Pitt's house after so readily agreeing to remain there as my hostage? Where had she flitted to? These were some of the unceasing questions which my brain propounded, and which my tongue fruitlessly asked of the grey walls about me.

No doubt, I told myself, her defection explained the reason of Pitt's sudden change of front. But why, why, why?

Why in the name of Satan had she so betrayed me?

Silence answered me, the silence of cold, slimy stone—the stone walls of my prison-house. Never a sound trickled to me from without, not a whisper, not a breath from the ceaseless stream of living, careless, free folk, the tumbling, moving, restless world of London. I might have been enveloped in a charnel-house at the world's end, so deep was the stillness, so profound the solitude.

As the night wore on I grew half frantic. Eyes peered at me from the blackness; eyes of the dead, of those whom in other thoughtless, reckless days, for a jest, a jeer, an insult half breathed or less, I had, as

was the manner of the time, paraded in the chilly morning air on many a heath, in many a peaceful glade, and with sword or pistol sent without remorse to join the legions of ghosts in the pitiless underworld. Gods, what a night it was! God save me from such another!

Sleep, a resolute stranger, kept far from me, and I was haunted with hideous visions of the past. At times, near mad with terror, I threw myself against the iron-bound door of the cell, and, raving like a maniac, beat and thundered on the panels. I might as well have called on the stars to assist me. I doubt if even any heard me; at least no answer came, and at length I desisted in veritable despair. Summoning all my strength I tried to force myself to calm, to free my brain of thought. Useless! I tried to think of the real danger in which I stood, the danger of suffering a disgraceful death for a crime of which I was innocent. That effort, too, was vain, for imagined terrors held my will spellbound, and the ghosts thronged upon me pitiless as fate. One there was who crouched before me, fear-inspiring above the rest, a pale spectre with luminous, reproachful eyes, the memoried semblance of a man whom years ago I had sent to the grave—a man who had committed every species of crime, and who had been held, even in the lax code of London morals, a detestable creature, to be shunned, avoided and despised. He had been a noted duellist; he had been the first

victim of my sword. At that time a mere youth, the flush of victory had charmed me, and the congratulations and flatteries of my friends, for then, at the outset of my career, I had had friends, though Heaven knows they soon enough deserted me.

I had been assured, and always thought, that his death constituted an action to my credit, to have rid the world of a danger, a pestilence, a creature who preyed on Society, who betrayed the trust of women, who robbed beardless boys and defied punishment behind the shield provided by a keen eye, a wicked reputation, and a mysterious thrust es carte. Yes, the manner of his death had hitherto seemed a good deed, but now it was otherwise! Fancy it may have been, but I could vow he stood beside me, thin and mistlike, ever clutching at the wound whereout his spirit fled, and gazing at me with eyes that sought out the weakness of my nature. I could have begged his mercy, his for-He seemed to speak and say that I giveness. had hurried him to hell, without an opportunity of repentance, in the midst of his sins; that through me he had been condemned to everlasting anguish. Fancy it may have been, but for long hours I crouched in a corner of the cell, gazing in speechless agony at this phantom of my conscience, aching with the pain of its reproach, and tortured by memories of my own, alas! innumerable misdeeds. Overwrought with the events of a period

of crowded hours, I felt that I was going fast insane. Terrors thronged upon me—imagined terrors, it may be said—but ah! what real terrors can blister the mind like those of the imagination?

Death at last came to hover about me, an unseen spectre, grimmer, more infinitely horrible than all others. The ground appeared to rock, to rise up and clutch at me, and at length I sank to the floor in a deep letheal swoon, wherein all was mercifully forgot—past, present and future. I awoke to find the day arrived; indeed, a few belated rays of sunlight were peeping timidly into my gloomy cell, and, moreover, someone was shaking me vigorously by the shoulder.

With a struggle I sat up to find myself stiff, sore and sad, but recovered sufficiently to be indifferent to fate. Nay, I am wrong, not all indifferent, for I was blithe to welcome the sunbeams, though shuddering to remember the horrors of the dark But I had suffered so much in the last night's cruel dark that capacity for realising further pain had almost passed from me.

Two men stood in the cell—one a common gaoler, the other an old man with silvery hair, dressed like a gentleman.

'Good-morning, my lord,' said the latter in a cheerful voice immediately he perceived I was awake. 'I have come to make you my apologies. It seems that you are a political prisoner, but by some error

you were in my absence brought to this cell yesterday. I only discovered the mistake late last night, and then decided to wait until morning to remove you, as I feared to break your slumbers.'

He feared to break my slumbers! but not even the unconscious mockery of the words could stir me from the apathetic listlessness into which I had fallen.

I shrugged my shoulders. 'You are the governor of the gaol, I suppose?'

He bowed. 'I have that honour.' Then, with a frank and very pleasing smile, 'I trust you will condescend to breakfast with me, my lord.'

I looked at him a moment, vastly astonished, and half inclined to accept his invitation, then muttered, 'You surely are unaware, sir, of the charge against me?'

He seemed surprised. 'It is not, after all, a very grave offence,' he murmured soothingly.

'Fratricide?' I questioned sharply.

He drew back with a start. 'Fratricide! My lord, you are dreaming. You are accused of nothing more serious than inciting His Majesty's Irish subjects to riotous and seditious practices. A grave matter enough considering the times, but to my mind pardonable in view of the circumstances of your upbringing. I am not of those who agree entirely with England's past treatment of Ireland or the present policy of Lord Castlereagh.'



His words dazed me, for they conveyed no meaning to my mind. Yesterday I, Caryl Franks, had been arrested and consigned to prison accused of assassinating my brother; to-day, the governor of Newgate insisted that I was charged merely with a paltry political offence. There was a mistake, of course, but where, whose, and what? Perhaps he mistook me for another of his charges. Ah, yes, I thought, there is the explanation! I turned to him with the observation.—

- 'I fancy that you take me for some other person.'
- 'I take you for Lord George Fitzmaurice,' he replied, smiling.
- 'Ah,' said I, 'it is as I thought; my name is Franks, I am the Earl of Sudmouth.'

To my surprise he merely shrugged his shoulders.

'Whatever you are called, or whatever you choose to call yourself, my lord, so be it,' he responded. 'For my part I am no spy, but a gentleman of as good a family as yourself; I do not follow the practices of some governors. I do not ask you to speak or to betray yourself; His Excellency, the Earl of Chatham, wrote me a note of recommendation asking me to show you what courtesy I might, and in consequence thereof I beg to offer you the accommodation of my private quarters, whither, if it so please you, we shall now proceed.'

Plainly a mistake, I argued, but why should I further refuse to take advantage of that which

promised me a profitable change of abode? Without more ado I consented, and with a nod directed him to lead on. We passed down long aisles and corridors of cells, through rows of obsequious turnkeys, to a wide and spacious courtyard walled high and floored with granite flags of huge dimensions. This we crossed and came at last to an iron door which opened passage to a tiny garden of pretty flowers that must have been tended with loving hands, for the plants were carefully pruned and watered, and, moreover, rich in bloom. Thence we passed into a small, but elegantly-furnished mansion, quite apart from the gaol itself, but yet within the prison walls.

The governor brought me to a comfortable bedroom which had already been prepared for my reception, and begged me to consider myself at home. Breakfast, he said, was preparing, and soon he would have me called thereto.

I could scarce understand my good fortune, and examined the apartment in a marvel, assuring myself that someone's mistake would soon be made manifest and I relegated to a cell and prison fare again. But I was philosopher enough to grasp the present and to enjoy the full advantage of my pretty surroundings while I could.

Two sweet nosegays of late violets and roses swam in vases on the mantel, culled freshly and most daintily arranged. These I could discern no occasion for nor object; but I was past power of reasoning 286

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and too weary to speculate concerning anything. I smelled the flowers with rapture, and then looked at my reflection in the mirror. I do not think it much surprised me to discover that my thick locks had become streaked in a single night with silver; indeed, I think I smiled, but the innate vanity of man impelled me to arrange my disordered attire becomingly again, and it was with a certain spirit of relief that I discarded the bandages which had disfigured my features for so long. But how changed I was! The mirror showed me a countenance no longer devil-mecare, reckless and good-humoured, as I had been wont for the past quarter century to see, but now severe, reserved and stern, and touched, moreover, with that melancholy which bread-and-butter misses love to depict and dote on in the heroes of their romantic dreams.

The sight shocked me a degree so that I twisted my lips into the forming of a smile; but the smile was a hollow counterfeit, and only intensified the features' melancholy, so I was fain to turn away and kiss the nosegays in an effort to forget.

A maid-servant tapped upon the door at length. 'Breakfast is served, my lord,' she said, and led me to a room at no great distance, wherein the governor awaited.

He was chatting with a girl of eighteen or so, a slender maid daintily attired in girlish fashion, her white arms bared nearly to the shoulder. 'Permit me to present to you, my lord, my daughter, Miss Bessie Ormond,' said the governor.

As she curtsied I observed her. She was less handsome than kind. Her face was pale, her features individually well shaped, yet proportionally irregular, but she owned a pair of large, liquid grey eyes, whose kind and pitiful regard so much surpassed mere beauty that, in spite of me, I was both touched and pleased.

Breakfast passed over agreeably enough, although I had no great appetite, and in its course I learned that the governor was now a widower, having married late in life, and that Miss Bessie, his only child, was as the apple of his eye. Indeed, there needed but little of discernment to discover that, for a very warm affection manifestly existed between father and daughter, which neither affected to conceal.

I thanked Miss Ormond for the kind attention of the nosegays, having guessed in that her handiwork the moment I set eyes on her. She replied that she loved flowers so much herself that she was fain to consider her affection must be shared by all the world.

The governor was called away to his official duties soon after the meal was finished, but he showed himself at such pains to provide for my comfort, and he gave me to the care of his daughter with words so kind and gracious, that I was constrained to bestir

myself and respond in grateful wise to his hospitable expressions. A courtly old gentleman he was whose venerable figure and princely manners transformed his dull abode into a veritable palace. I could but wonder to find so sweet a nature chained to so harsh a calling. Miss Bessie led me to a library, a quaint old room hung heavily with ancient arras and stocked with a thousand mouldy tomes, whose titles were alone sufficient to defend them from aught but casual disturbance since they were for the most part either Greek or Latin. I felt a very lad again to see those old school-boy bugbears-Xenophon, Thucydides, Tacitus, Livy, Virgil, Pliny, Cicero, Juvenal, Horace, Ovid, Sallust, Seneca, Homer and Herodotus; all were there and they frowned at me from their mildewed receptacles with all the formidable menace of bewrinkled dons. I turned for comfort to Miss Ormond to find the gentle girl raptly regarding me with her big measuring and thoughtful eyes. It was easy to discover that she had already woven a romance around me, easy to see that she was curious concerning my incarceration, anxious to befriend and cheer my lonely state. And she was sweet and winsome, a child of tender sensibilities, without sense of humour, but a heart full of kindness and of sympathy. I think it is that very lack of humour in the composition of womankind which first wins man to the confidence needful to enable him confess his softer feelings. Love does not live in laughter.

laughs at all things, love included, and even in tragedy perceives a comic side. Woman laughs when she is tickled or in order to conceal her thoughts, and humour is to her but an empty word whose meaning she may sometimes dimly comprehend when dazzled by a broad and patent farce. It is best so. Were it otherwise, woman could not love man for laughing at him.

I was prevailed upon to tell my story to Miss Ormond, the more readily that I discovered a longing to be comforted. Hours fled in the recital, but I kept no count of time, for never had historian so sweet an auditor. The maid was all heart, all kindliness and charity. She listened to my tale half breathlessly, now moved to gladness, now to tears, and though I never tried to spare myself, never a syllable would she credit to my detriment. When all was told she bade me hope, and assuming the manner of a sweet inspired oracle resolutely disentangled my position, and laughed to scorn the thought that I had been mistaken by her father for another.

'No,' she declared, 'Pitt, for some weighty reason of his own, has imprisoned you under an invented name, and on a charge pretended for his purpose. All will soon be well with you. Only wait and hope!'

I could not agree with her though I wished to well enough.

'It is the disappearance of Mademoiselle d'Arras

which troubles me most,' I murmured. 'Why should she have flown at such a time? Can you, a woman, read me the secret of another woman's heart?'

But Miss Ormond was a staunch champion of her sex.

'Be sure there was an urgent reason,' she returned.
'From what you have told me of her, I feel that I already know and love Mademoiselle d'Arras. I know that she is a sweet, true lady who loves you well. I know that she has not failed you. You will soon see, my lord.'

Her pretty confidence, while not convincing, nevertheless touched me deeply.

'Dear Miss Ormond,' I muttered, 'you give me hope. I cannot properly thank you for your kind sympathy, but your soft heart will be glad to know that you have cheered my sadness,'

She arose with a smile.

'Indeed I am glad, my lord,' she said, 'but now will you excuse me, for I must attend to my house-hold duties.'

Muttering an apology for having so long detained her, I took her hand, and bending low imprinted on her pretty fingers a kiss of very gratitude. It was then that an exclamation startled us. Miss Ormond shrank back as I released her hand, blushing hotly, for in the doorway stood her father, who had approached unheard by us, the sound of his footsteps dulled by the pile of the thick carpet. But beside him stood a marvellously beautiful woman, who stared straight before her with sparkling eyes, a red spot of colour burning in either of her cheeks.

It was Mademoiselle d'Arras.

I rubbed my eyes to make sure.

'Clarisse!' I muttered, doubtful of my senses.

Mademoiselle raised her brows with an admirable assumption of hauteur, and turned calmly to the governor.

'I fear we have arrived at an inopportune moment, sir!' she said; then addressing us, 'Accept my apologies for the interruption, milord and Miss—I have not the honour of madam's acquaintance—'

'My daughter, Miss Ormond — Mademoiselle d'Arras,' murmured the governor with a courtly bow.

Clarisse was plainly jealous; she eyed my companion with an insolent smile and dropped her an unwilling courtesy.

Miss Bessie, however, with a bright glance at me, took her father's arm and moved away.

'Was I not right to bid you hope?' she muttered as she passed.

Mademoiselle, however, arrested her departure.

'I am merely the bearer of a message which all may hear,' she said disdainfully, 'a message from Milord of Chatham to Lord George Fitzmaurice.'

'The message then is not for me,' I answered coldly, for I was impatient both of mademoiselle's

demeanour and a mystery of which she appeared to hold the key.

'Pardon,' said mademoiselle, speaking in French, 'the message is to you, milord.'

I shrugged. 'Well, mademoiselle, I wait to hear it.'

- 'Milord of Chatham sends you his regards, and exceedingly regrets your detention. He believes in your innocence and is preparing to establish it, but for the present he cannot release you.'
- 'Has the Marquis de Sevringen been arrested?'
 I demanded.
 - 'I do not know, monsieur.'
 - 'And your brother-Monsieur the Count?'
- 'He leaves England to-day for Belgium, milord. He is at this moment awaiting me without.'
- 'Leaves England to-day!' I gasped. 'Why, he alone can prove my innocence!'
 - 'He has seen Lord Pitt,' replied Clarisse.

But this was vague. 'Tell me, Clarisse,' I muttered in a low voice, 'why did you leave Pitt's house after promising to remain there as my hostage?'

Mademoiselle favoured me with a very haughty look.

- 'I did not promise to stand idly by and see my brother sacrificed, monsieur, even to save you,' and she swept me a mocking courtesy.
- 'So you escaped that you might try and warn him?'

'Yes, and found him not. Have I to thank you for that?'

I replied indignantly, 'Well, and was I not justified in what I did? His silence meant my ruin. It seems to me that he had conspired most scurvily to work my death.'

'Henri is not so base as you imagine, milord. You appear to entertain but a poor opinion of my family. Doubtless you consider me also a vile creature!'

'Clarisse!' I cried reproachfully.

But she flashed at me a very angry glance.

'Learn, monsieur, that my brother returned to London of his own accord in order to prove your innocence.'

'He found the ports blocked against his egress!'
I found myself unable to resist this shaft.

She looked me up and down with a disdainful frown.

- 'Since that is your opinion, there is nothing more I need say except farewell, monsieur.'
- 'Farewell, Clarisse! What mean you?' I demanded.
 - 'Why, that my brother awaits me!'

But a horrid thought entered my mind. 'You—you do not intend to leave England, Clarisse?'

She replied icily, 'My brother is my guardian, monsieur, I must obey his commands.'

'You would leave me!' I cried, made utterly miserable by her words.

'Ah, bah!' she muttered low, 'you will not miss me, monsieur; you have a trick of finding consolation. Why, even as I entered—'

'Even as you entered, mademoiselle,' I whispered angrily 'I kissed the hand of a lady who had just given me a hope of seeing you again. I had commenced until that moment to despair.'

She smiled incredulously. 'She is a very pretty lady, monsieur.'

'Do not mistake me,' I entreated. 'I swear to you—'

'You would perjure yourself, monsieur!' interrupted Clarisse, with fine disdain, and a contemptuous wave of her hand. 'Why, it is useless to try convince me; even this morning I have heard many tales of you. Where you go they say that women smile, and when you depart women weep.'

She counted on her fingers. 'They have told me one, three, ten, twenty of your lovers, and all by name. But these were only those they knew of; you, I vow, could name me as many more. Is it not so?'

'Listen to me, Clarisse, one moment,' I implored. But she gathered up her skirts and made me a stately reverence.

'I make you my compliments, monsieur; you have a sweet voice, a most persuasive tongue, but I have many things to do, I beg you to excuse me. Farewell, monsieur.' She extended her hand.

'You can leave me thus — thus, Clarisse?' I murmured.

'I must, monsieur. Will you not kiss my hand?'

I folded my arms. 'Go, then, mademoiselle!'

She examined her fingers with a contemplative air, and whispered, with a meaning smile, 'Is Miss Ormond's hand whiter then than mine, monsieur?'

'Her heart at least is kind!' I muttered.

'I congratulate you, monsieur,' she flashed. 'Kind hearts are the rarest of jewels, you are indeed fortunate.'

'Mademoiselle,' I answered bitterly, 'your desertion of me is the worst harm, the worst hurt you can inflict. Such taunts are unworthy of you. One does not kick a fallen adversary. At least allow me to retain an unspoilt recollection of your past kindness.'

For a moment she regarded me with softened eyes, while it seemed that her heart struggled with resentment, but then her aspect grew mocking again, and she retreated swiftly to the doorway, where the governor and Miss Ormond stood watching us in frank amazement.

'Good-bye, monsieur,' she called out over her shoulder.

I had not the heart to answer her, and it was thus that she departed, leaving me standing there, lost in sad reflections.

How the next days passed I scarcely recollect. They were infinitely wretched and wearisome in spite 296

of the unswerving sympathy, the unfailing kindness of both the governor and his daughter. This affectionate couple, whom I now delight to number among my dearest friends, served me always with the most delicate consideration. I was treated rather as a prince of the blood than a prisoner. No pains were spared to amuse and entertain me. Every attention in the power of human beings to bestow which might be calculated to lighten the sadness or minister to the comfort of an unhappy creature was lavished upon me, but in spite of all I could not shake off my depression; I was for the time without hope or care for the future. I had been robbed of all that made life worth the living, and now, in consequence, remained profoundly miserable. It was in vain I told myself that Mademoiselle d'Arras was an ungrateful creature, a flirt, a wanton of emotions, utterly heartless or cruel-hearted. The fact remained that I was fathoms deep in love, that I worshipped every memory concerning her, even in her coldest, her most ungentle moods. It is true that at first I was filled with a keen resentment, that I felt ther treatment of me sorely; but with the hours bitterness faded and softened to regret. I remembered only the perfect face, the fascinating, childlike coquetries which had charmed my heart from out my keeping. I remembered only the times of my sharpest happiness, when, a creature all fire and passion, she had responded to my kisses or languished half-swooning in my arms.

But recollection was a sword double edged and keen; it brought me at the same time happiness and an anguish hardly to be borne.

Through that time no message reached me from the outside world; I might have been already dead and buried, so utterly I seemed to be forgot.

CHAPTER XIX

THE IVORY SKULL

IN sad procession the leaden hours of four long days passed by and the fifth sunrise found me still a prisoner. On the wane of that afternoon, however Miss Ormond sought me out with the news that Pitt had come to visit me.

My heart in my mouth, I muttered out, 'Clarisse!' But the girl shook her head. 'He is alone.' My last hope faded then of seeing Clarisse again, and I could perceive that Miss Ormond also was at length disposed to doubt, for she spoke no word of comfort as she had ever before been wont to do, only looked at me with sad and sympathetic eyes.

Listlessly I descended the stairs and entered the reception-room. Pitt, who was standing in the centre of the floor conversing in muttered tones with Mr Ormond, swung on his heel at my knock and came forward with both hands outstretched.

'Let me congratulate you, my lord,' he said. 'Your innocence is at last made manifest.'

But disregarding his advance I folded my arms and demanded haughtily, May I inquire the reason 298

that I have been imprisoned on a false charge and under a pretended name?'

Pitt signed to the governor to depart, then answered frankly,—

'To tell you the truth, my lord, it was done as much in my own interest as in yours; for your sake, in the first place, in order to save you the unhappiness of being confined on such a charge as fratricide. In the second, for my convénience, for I wished neither my colleagues nor my enemies to have any opportunity to question you before I was thoroughly prepared to act, and so risk the disturbing of my plans. Had you been arrested in your proper name this would have been impossible.'

I bowed ironically. 'Then I am to infer that you were personally convinced of my innocence at the time you ordered my arrest?'

He answered smilingly, 'You must not expect me to admit too much, my lord.'

'I suppose I am now free.'

He hesitated and moved uneasily. 'Ah! H'm, well, yes, of course, but the fact is I require your assistance—your immediate assistance—in a matter which I will not conceal from you most vitally affects yourself.'

'I am all curiosity,' I observed drily.

'Well, the matter is, my lord, just this. We have that scoundrel De Sevringen safely by the heels, but he has not yet confessed his guilt. For State reasons we have been unable to detain the Count d'Arras, and although I hold his properly-attested confession absolving you from the murder of your late brother, still, technically, this is not sufficient to clear you.'

'But it will be sufficient to hang De Sevringen!' I retorted. 'When will he be tried?'

The Earl of Chatham, to my amaze, quite changed colour.

'That is the point which I have been steering for. The fact is De Sevringen must not be prosecuted. After his arrest we discovered his papers, and too many Englishmen of rank, far too many, are treasonably implicated. If he were given opportunity to speak at this juncture it might cause a revolution, and we cannot afford that England should run such a risk. The eyes of the world are upon us. Napoleon has all his huge army of invasion embarked, waiting merely for the arrival of Villeneuve to cross the Channel and pour his legions on our shores. It is of first importance that we should be settled among ourselves. Dissension might spell disaster, and such a disaster as would give us body and soul to France.'

'Then,' I observed sardonically, 'the fate of England is in the keeping of the Marquis de Sevringen.'

Pitt frowned. 'That is a somewhat exaggerated method of describing the situation, my lord, but at anyrate no one could exaggerate the effect which certain public revelations might produce.'

- 'So you do not intend to try him?'
- 'I do not.'
- 'Then am I to understand that you wish me to assume the *rôle* of scapegoat and suffer in the place of De Sevringen and the Judases of England?'
- 'By no means,' returned Pitt, hurriedly. 'That is very far from my mind. I wish to clear you absolutely from all suspicion of having accomplished your brother's death. But you see how I am placed; you surely must recognise how difficult is my position.'

I was puzzled and frankly admitted it.

Pitt paced for several moments up and down the apartment.

- 'Had we the rascal's confession once in our keeping, the rest would be easy,' he said at last.
 - 'In that case, what would you do, my lord?'
 - 'Suffer him to escape—or—' He hesitated.
 - 'Well, my lord?'
- 'You are dull, Lord Devenac,' said Pitt, drily. 'There is a quarrel between you, is there not?' He eyed me keenly.
- I flushed with rage and met his scrutiny with a straight, indignant glance. 'You think me an assassin!' I cried.
- 'Softly, softly,' muttered the Earl of Chatham, 'the victor of a duel is not called an assassin.'

I saw his d-sign then, and though it did not please,

it did not displease me, for I owed a long score to De Sevringen.

'You see,' went on Pitt, 'De Sevringen has been arrested but without publicity, and like you he has been imprisoned on my privy warrant under a false Were his confession once obtained and he name. thereafter quietly transported to a concerted place to fall before your sword, his confession would be converted into a dying atonement made in consideration of death. Now as regards yourself. The law defied by the murder of your brother must have a You have been publicly accused of the victim. crime. Public opinion would therefore demand your trial unless we can infallibly demonstrate another to have been the murderer. We can only do this by exhibiting to the public the dying statement of the dead murderer himself. Do you follow me? abominate such a method of escaping from the difficulty, but I have England to consider-England and her enemies, both external and internal.'

In a flash I saw that the whole plan was designed in my best interests. It would no less serve the State than myself, for it would not only clear me of all connection with my brother's death, but it would save me from publicity. Moreover, there would be no trial in which a clever prosecuting Counsel would rake up those flagrant incidents of the past which now I heartily desired should be shrouded in eternal oblivion.

I nodded. 'The first thing is to secure this confession,' I observed. 'Have you a plan for that, my lord?'

Pitt shrugged his shoulders. 'I must leave that to you. He is here, you will have access to him. I need scarcely suggest that it is not necessary to be over fine in your methods. I empower you to offer freedom—you understand? One detail concerning the rascal may be of use to you—he is an honorary captain of Yeomanry.'

'I shall visit him at once,' I cried excitedly.

'Good,' said Pitt. 'I shall wait here for your return.'
In less than five minutes I stood before the Marquis de Sevringen. The rascal was housed in a small, ill-smelling cell, and chained by the ankles to a ring-bolt in the floor. He greeted me with a scowl of hate, but disdaining to take notice of his disposition I waved the turnkey to depart and confronted him without preamble.

'We can serve each other, marquis!' I announced abruptly. 'I have come to see if we may strike on terms.'

I knew the man to be a coward, I resolved to play that card to the death.

He eyed me sullenly, but made no answer.

'To-morrow morning,' I proceeded, speaking slowly and with brutal directness, 'you will be tried by court-martial (you are a captain of Yeomanry), convicted as a spy and shot.'

His face went a fishy sickly colour, but his sullenness remained; he kept silence.

'In which case I shall not hide from you the fact that I am badly served. Although the authorities possess absolute evidence that you assassinated my brother, and although D'Arras, who is in custody, has confessed his share in the crime and is waiting to clear me, I shall have to stand my trial—for purely technical reasons, but nevertheless I must stand trial. Now, to be frank with you, I do not wish this. The publicity which of necessity must be given the affair would cause an ugly stigma to attach to my name for years to come, no matter how white the courts may paint me. I have therefore to propose that you make a full confession of the crime, exactly as it occurred. In return I offer you your freedom.'

Ah! he was interested at last, the rascal!

- 'My freedom?' he gasped.
- 'Yes!'
- 'A trap!' he growled. 'How do I know that you can, or will, keep your word?'
- 'Judge,' I retorted. 'I ask nothing from you without proof. I have already bought over the governor of this gaol, he has engaged to do all that I require. Agree to my terms, to-night at dusk you will be liberated. A turnkey, for a consideration, has consented to take the blame of your escape. I shall be in waiting for you in a closed carriage without the gates and shall convey you to my rooms. There

arrived you must write the confession, and sign it before proper witnesses; when that is done you may go to the devil.'

'As soon as I sign the confession you will have me re-arrested,' he cried suspiciously.

I shrugged my shoulders. 'You must trust to me a little, sir. Either do as I request or remain here and be shot.'

'Swear to me that you will not have me rearrested.'

'I swear it.'

'But even then, how can I get out of England? All the ports are closed.'

'Ah, bah!' said I, 'whether you leave England or not is no concern of mine. I offer you a chance of escape in exchange for what I require from you. It remains for you to accept or refuse. But be quick, already I have stayed with you too long.'

He threw up his hands and stared at the ceiling, as if seeking counsel from the stone.

'Good-bye,' I cried, moving to the door. 'Good-bye, monsieur!'

He turned and surveyed me with eyes of hate. 'I accept.'

'Good.'

'At dusk you will come for me, monsieur?'

'I shall not fail.'

The door clanged and I returned with beating heart to Pitt.

- 'Already'!' he cried. 'What is it?'
- 'At dusk this evening I have promised to take him to my rooms, where he will sign a confession in return for freedom.'
 - 'Freedom!' repeated Pitt, inquiringly.
- 'Ay,' I muttered, 'and freedom he shall have—greater freedom than he has yet known. But I must have witnesses, my lord. I cannot afford to run the risk of being accused of a second assassination.'

Pitt mused a while, regarding me with a sharp glance and an excitement he strove vainly to subdue.

There is a little matter which I have throughout life often remarked. No man with an ounce of spirit in his body can prevent himself from admiring an encounter between well-matched opponents, be they howsoever armed.

Pitt in his younger days had been a devotee of the small sword, and had won some repute as a quick and clever fencer.

I caught him now asking his prudence certain questions, but prudence did not convince him, and I esteemed him the more for his failing—it could not be called a weakness.

'De Sevringen is accounted a skilled swordsman?' he muttered.

I bowed silently.

'And you, my Lord Devenac, the same thing is said of you both far and wide.'

I bowed again, guessing what he meditated, but unwilling to assist him.

- 'Well,' he muttered, 'I do not see why not, do you, Devenac?'
 - 'I beg your pardon, my lord.'
- 'I do not see what is there to prevent me being the witness you require.'
- 'I require more than one witness,' I answered gravely; 'and another thing, both De Sevringen and myself must have a second, though for the matter of that each witness might act the double part. I should be personally delighted to accept the honour you offer me, but how could it be, my lord? On sight of you our quarry would at once suspect, and perhaps in sheer despair defeat our purpose.'

Pitt sighed. 'I have never seen a duel,' he said regretfully, and with a smile of resignation departed after having cordially shaken me by the hand.

At dusk I visited the outside world a free man once more. I found a closed carriage waiting at the prison gate, and before many minutes had passed, De Sevringen, wrapped from head to heel in a long cloak, was given into my charge by the governor himself.

I was half fearful that he would try and make a bolt of it upon the moment that he felt himself at large, and held myself prepared to thwart promptly such a disposition, but I need not have been alarmed; the man's spirit was gone, and throughout the drive he sat in a corner of the carriage trembling like a stricken thing, always urging expedition in a voice which was no longer soft and beautiful, but, on the contrary, harsh with fear.

Pitt had paved the way to my desires. We found his private secretary, Mr Polkinghorne, and Lord Eveston in my rooms expecting us; the face of either wearing such an air of anxiety and agitation that I should have been alarmed had I taken time to consider them. Richards also from the background gave me a warning look, whose meaning I did not pause to investigate.

My first act was to doubly lock the door and transfer the key to my pocket.

'Gentlemen,' I said abruptly, 'you are all aware that not long since I was publicly accused of the dreadful crime of fratricide. You have been since privately instructed that I am innocent. In order, however, to absolutely clear my character in the world's eyes, I have prevailed upon the Marquis de Sevringen to make a certain explanation of circumstances within his knowledge.'

'On conditions,' gasped the marquis, interjecting hoarsely.

'Pardon,' I replied with a sneer, 'on a condition. To proceed, gentlemen, the marquis has incurred certain penalties under the laws of England, a fact which you will easily perceive for yourselves a little later. The condition upon which he will make the explanation which I have referred to is nothing less than freedom, which means, I believe, a chance of escape from the law, since there is a warrant out for his arrest. Now, in order to reassure the marquis, who does not place the implicit reliance on my word that I could wish, I call you both to witness that, his explanation or confession once made in writing before you and signed, I shall give him his freedom if it cost me my life. Is it clear?'

Polkinghorne and Eveston both nodded. De Sevringen was, however, not satisfied.

'What if those gentlemen should hinder me?' he muttered.

I turned to them. 'I beg you gentlemen to join in my pledge.'

Eveston nodded. Polkinghorne murmured, 'Certainly, my lord.'

'Are you satisfied?' I asked coldly of the marquis. He was shaking like an aspen, but he muttered an assent.

I pushed him at once to the table, and giving him ink and paper, bade him write to my dictation. In a calm, clear voice I straight away proceeded to set forth the reasons of and for the assassination of my brother, and the arrangement and horrid manner of the crime down to its last detail. The others listened spellbound, staring at me in incredulous amaze, all

save the marquis, who, with bent head, scratched at the paper, never once glancing up; he was a broken man, and I make no doubt in the very extremity of humiliation and shame. I could almost have pitied him, but the recollection of the death of Elfrida, Duchess of Powers, before Heaven the work of his hands, dried up all charitable feelings, and steeled my heart against remorse. The wretch was not fit to live; I felt it in my bones.

When all was done, and a long hour had passed before the signatures were subscribed, Eveston as a magistrate signing last, De Sevringen got to his feet and faced me with wild and bloodshot eyes.

- 'I have done my part,' he cried hoarsely. 'Now let me go.'
- 'I promised you freedom,' I answered, cold as stone.
- 'Then unlock the door!' He was trembling like. a leaf.
- 'Freedom,' I answered, pointing upwards, 'lies in that direction, marquis. I have promised you freedom, and will keep my word to the last drop of blood in my body.'

He seemed not to understand. 'Unlock the door!' he cried, half frantically; 'precious minutes are wasting.'

'Ay,' said I, 'minutes which, if you believe in a hereafter, you would do well to spend in prayer.'

- 'Unlock the door! curse you, unbar the door!' he screamed.
- 'Marquis,' I said sternly, 'you have a right to say you have been tricked, to call me liar if you will; I shall not reprove you, for I think—I hope—you are about to die and I to be your executioner. The freedom that you bargained for I shall not give you, but a greater licence—yes, the freedom that was in my thoughts when we parleyed—the freedom of the soul in death.'

He stared at me aghast. 'You would murder me,'he muttered, shrinking back towards the wall, step by step.

- 'No,' I answered, 'there remains one chance for you to live, but that is by a road which must pass across my corpse. There is to be a duel between us—a duel to the death. Should you survive, these gentlemen will allow you to depart unmolested.'
- 'I shall not fight,' he screamed. 'I shall not fight you.'

The rat saw his chance, and seized it. He was adversaried by gentlemen to whom assassination was a thing impossible. By refusing to fight he forced our hands. I, moreover, had pledged my word not to cause his re-arrest. I was therefore tongue-tied. But Eveston was equal to the occasion.

'You had better fight,' he cut in sharply; 'it is at least better to die sword in hand than by the halter, and I swear that if you do not fight you shall be hanged before the week is out.'

'You swore to me that I should not be re-arrested,' cried the poor wretch to me.

'But I made no such promise,' retorted Eveston; 'and if I had, and sworn it on fifty Bibles, I should break the vow without considering my honour forfeited.'

The marquis stared at us for some moments without speaking, his eyes turgid with fear, but at length he aroused himself and assumed a certain dignity—the dignity of despair, perhaps, for there was but faint hope apparent in his voice when next he spoke.

'I understand that you will pledge your honour that I depart unmolested if I kill monsieur.'

The others turned to me, but I nodded, and they gave the pledge.

On that the marquis threw off his coat, and I followed his example. As I did so there fell from my pocket, and rolled upon the floor, the purse and ivory skull which had been my companions for so long. De Sevringen uttered a sharp cry, and darting forward picked up the trifle. 'It is mine!' he gasped and thrust it in his bosom.

'You are welcome,' I returned with a smile, for the ghastly bauble had long ceased to interest me, and besides was not, strictly speaking, my property.

On my assurance, however, the marquis withdrew from his shirt and toyed a moment with the skull, plunged seemingly in reverie. On a sudden—'You will kill me?' he asked, and fixed his bloodshot glance upon me.

'I shall try to, monsieur. I can only deplore the necessity. I pray you pardon me!'

'You have always thwarted me,' he muttered musingly. 'From the hour of our first meeting, when you robbed me of this toy, you have thwarted me. But for you my plans would never have miscarried; but for you I would be a free man to-day—in France, perhaps, and high in favour with Napoleon. You have wrested from me the profits of long hours of dangerous toil. You have—'

'Pardon,' I interrupted coldly, 'there is no need to wind out words or recount the causes of—'

'Wait,' he interrupted in turn, 'there is. Hear me a moment.'

The marquis, as I have said before, was a handsome man of dark, commanding presence. At that moment his mask appeared both dignified and noble, and his eyes extorted from us all a species of grudging sympathy by some strange quality of inherent magnetism.

Astonished, I could only bow to him in silence, and we stared at each other long and full.

'You think me a coward,' he proceeded presently, speaking slowly and with extraordinary calm. 'Well, I make you my compliments; you are not entirely mistaken. Physically I am a coward. And yet!—You have surprised me in the pursuit of a dangerous

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avocation, a calling wherein one false step should infallibly evoke destruction. Have you considered that? Have you asked yourself the reason? No. But then— I shall tell it you. The only fear of which I am capable is physical. Morally I am strong, stronger than most other men. I have sometimes forced my faltering body to tasks and risks which you, with all your iron nerves, would never dare to undergo. You would sneer and say it is ambition which has prompted me. I laugh in your I say to you that I am not face, milord. ambitious. What I have done has been in mere experiment. I tell you that within this carcase reside two different spirits. One—ah, bah!—a trembling coward, but the other a giant of energy, of curiosity, intelligence and strength! It is true that in some cases the coward wins the mastery. You will understand now the reason that you found me in our first encounter armed with mail. I take no shame in the memory. It will show you that I speak the truth. Death of itself my soul has never feared, but my wretched body has always trembled on treading the avenues of death, and panic then has overwhelmed every other sense, forcing my wretched soul to act the craven in despite of me.'

I was interested at his words, as were also my companions, but I could discern no occasion for his quaint apology.

'To what end, monsieur?' I muttered, 'to what end?'

'To death, milord,' he answered proudly. 'Death is the end of all things. I had been saying when you stayed my tongue that you alone of all men have, since we met, been consistently my bane. It is strange that on this night of all others, when you would force me to play with you the game of death, on the very eve of the encounter you should restore to me this skull of mine. I am not of a superstitious mind, milord, but the circumstance smacks of Fate. Do not you agree with me?'

'Tis a gruesome toy,' I replied, 'but I am not such a fool as to pretend to discern fate in such a trifle.'

He did not heed my latter words.

'You say truly, milord,' he murmured, 'it is the proper emblem of death.'

He suddenly approached a step and eyed me keenly. 'You, milord, who are a brave man, will you admit to me that I have a chance with you? You are, it is certain, more skilful with the sword than I; but I am not unskilled. There are many chances in a combat. One's foot may slip, one's eye be dimmed—a thousand accidents are possible which might give the battle to the less prepared. Is it not so?'

Undoubtedly, monsieur, I returned, all in a marvel at his words, but at the same time vastly impatient to commence the fight.

'Eh, bien /' he muttered, a strange, illegible smile faintly curving his lips. 'Learn, then, that I discard those chances. I voluntarily reject them. I have tasted most sweet things of life, milord, and discovered them to be at bottom most worthless. Lovea splendid passion, it is true, but variable as the wind. Friendship—a shadow which is good to rest in, but which ever vanishes into the light of any testing lamp. Hate—a lasting ferment which it is foolish to submit to, for not even with death comes satisfaction. Advancement—a sop to the Cerberus of discontent, which is swallowed before it is well tasted, and thereafter only frets the mind to greater greed. Revenge—well, that of all is a treasure inexhaustible, since its pleasures can only be enhanced by memory with one who, like myself, is proof against remorse. Ah, bah! why should I say more? Take my word for it, milord, in these past forty years I have experimented blithely with the world, and have denied myself nothing which my hands had power to grasp.'

'I can well believe you,' I answered politely; 'but pardon me, you are discursive, these gentlemen wait for us.'

He threw back his head and gave vent to a horrible, sardonic laugh. 'Truly it is most discourteous in me to keep them waiting to see me die. Messieurs, I make you a thousand most profound apologies. Well, I am ready.'

Eveston advanced and offered him the choice of two fine blades. But the marquis scarcely glanced at them, and shrugged his shoulders with disdain. 'I have no use for them,' he said, and abruptly turning his back on the young man he pressed the spring of the ivory skull, whereupon a section of the occiput sprang open, disclosing the paste within.

'Sacré!' he cried angrily, 'this has been tampered with!'

It came to my mind that Clarisse had given some of the paste to the Crown Prince of —— at St Cloud, but I did not choose descend to make an explanation. Instead of that I took a sword and stood on guard. 'I beg you to arm yourself, marquis,' I said sternly.

He eyed me with a cold smile, and silently ate some of the paste, extracting it from the skull with his fingers, whereupon the whole apartment became quickly permeated with the odour of almonds. 'I regret to disappoint you, my friend,' making the pretence of extreme courtesy, 'but believe me, you put yourself to a great deal of unnecessary trouble.'

'What do you mean?' I cried, angered past patience. 'Do you after all refuse to fight?'

He coolly ate another considerable portion of the sweetmeat before he replied, then, with a shrug of unaffected amusement,—

'You would not fight with a dead man, monsieur?'
'What do you mean?' I gasped, but a light break-

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ing on my mind, cried out, 'It is poison you are eating!'

'Yes,' said the marquis, 'it is a poison, and poison of such a cunning texture that in the space of half an hour I shall be dead.'

Before he had completed the sentence his face assumed an expression of keen pain, and clasping his hands tightly across his chest he gave vent to a deep, hollow moan.

Speechless with surprise and dismay we gathered round him, but he broke from us, and crying out as if in a paroxysm staggered across the room until he reached the table, across which he threw himself, groaning horribly. It was a piece of superlatively fine acting. I saw the rascal give a cunning glance at us, then he snatched up his confession and darted to the fireplace. But I was near as swift as he. 'Revenge!' he cried, and threw the paper to the flames. 'Not so,' I shouted, and thrusting him aside, quick as light caught and saved the precious document before it was so much as scorched.

His rage was diabolical. With a curse of fury he sprang upon me while yet I stooped, but Eveston came to my relief and pulled him roughly back. There followed a wild mélée in which the marquis, foiled in his desires, fought, spat and kicked like a veritable imp. He recovered his control at last as abruptly as he had lost it. Ceasing on a sudden his frantic struggles, he staggered to his feet, and,

sharply watched by us all, threw himself into the nearest chair, whereon he looked up at us and laughed. Ah! his laughter; it rings in my ears now to think of it! Such elfin mirth it was, so fiendishly malicious, so contemptuous, so despairing! A demon lost to hope might thuswise greet and ridicule the decree divinely issued for his eternal punishment and doom.

We stood, a dazed and helpless trio, staring at him in numbed, foolish fashion, listening dumbly to his hideous cachinnations. Nor was the spell broken with his speech. And presently he spoke, to detail with cold and gloomy braggadocio a score of atrocious crimes he declared he had committed.

But soon real pain and the fear of death crowded out all other thoughts, and he threw himself to the floor, raving, cursing and entreating us to save him, to send for a leech, to do anything which might help or prolong his wretched existence.

Overcome with horror and pity for the tortures he now undoubtedly endured, we did at last as he requested, and despatched Richards post-haste for an apothecary, but when the doctor arrived the marquis was past human aid. He died in the end a miserable craven, dragging himself upon his stomach from one to another of us, shrieking out in his agony and imploring us to render that aid which it was then impossible for any mortal to bestow.

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When all was over we found, to my astonishment, Pitt lying in a deep swoon, stretched out behind a curtain, where he had, in spite of me, prevailed on Richards to conceal him, so that he might see the duel. The horror of that scene had been too much for a man whose shoulders had been wont to bear for long and unassisted the cares of a great kingdom.

As for Eveston, his control had long before given way and tears still uninterruptedly trickled down his cheeks, while Polkinghorne sat shivering in his chair, ill and half fainting, his teeth chattering as with an ague. I alone was outwardly unmoved, but then my nerves were of iron. I had seen death in every shape on the bloody battlefields of India; moreover, I had lately experienced most difficult emotions, and my sensibilities were dulled, but yet I can never deny that, in spite of the calm which my companions marvelled at, I was sick at soul-sick and shuddering. But I had more to think of than the others. With De Sevringen's horrid death a black thought had come in consequence to sit with me. It was torture to reflect that the sweet hands of Clarisse had sent the Crown Prince of — to his grave. Whatever happened I must keep that bitter cup of knowledge from her lips. I raised my hand and vowed myself to that. then laughed out brokenly to think what mattered after all, she had deserted me.

'You laugh!' cried Eveston, aghast, 'you laugh!'

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Polkinghorne stared at me in dismay; even Pitt turned back, as he departed, to gaze at me. 'You can laugh!' he said.

I could not answer them. My heart was already aching and over full, and there was a tightness in my throat that strangled speech. But Richards strode forward with a distinct though muttered commentary. 'Fools!' he said, then, more politely, 'Gentlemen, I pray you go! My master is sick and overcome, but he is a man. He does not weep, therefore he laughs. Ha! ha! ha!' and Richard laughed too, to prove his manhood, though his voice was weeping.

CHAPTER XX

I MARRY

LONDON soon became distasteful to me, so full was it sown with unpleasant memories and sad associations; 'hateful' indeed were the better word. Two days I spent in the gloomy quiet of my rooms after De Sevringen's death, Richards my sole companion. We railed together against women the better part of that period. Richards, indeed, showed himself so bitter that I commenced to suspect an unfortunate love affair on his part, but the rogue assured me to the contrary; it was his longbottled-up opinion of the gentle sex suddenly given vent to, he explained. But I noticed that I now but seldom encountered my landlady lingering about the corridors, although I once remarked her in the basement deep in converse with a black-whiskered invalided soldier who wore his arm in a sling. mentioned this matter casually to Richards, but the beggar was on guard, and his indifference was consummate.

I thought a good deal about joining the army again, being convinced that my influence with Pitt

could now easily secure me a colonelcy, but a growing lack of ambition, combined with a nascent drowsiness of disposition, prevented this idea from taking root. I was commencing to feel the years by this. By gad! next birthday would give me forty-four years of existence to reflect upon. Fortyfour years! At four-and-twenty I had considered a man two decades my senior as a veritable Methuselah. Well, even now I did not feel old, but I was no longer a boy; the blood flowed more staidly in its courses, and refused to flame at every passing incident. Old delights no longer attracted me. I could think of the gaming-tables without the gambler's itch to hazard, for I was now so rich that gain or loss could give me little of excitement. Why, even my treatment of Richards was altered. He was clumsy-I did not trouble to rail at him; he was impudent—he went unpunished, save for a sharp rebuke. Richards violently opposed my warlike thoughts. He hated the army, he abominated warfare, he detested the city. A peaceful country life for him. He painted the country in glowing colours—a wide estate, a splendid mansion, sport with fowling-piece or fishing-rod; an occasional exciting encounter with over-daring poachers; long walks, fresh air, healthy exercise and appetite, long nights of unbroken, dreamless sleep. And then tenants to look after and lord it over. He certainly aroused my interest, and so much so that at length

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I was persuaded to give the life a trial. I despatched a note to Pitt informing him of my intention, and on the third day set out for Devonshire and Castle Sudmouth.

The whole thing was a mistake; I had lived in the city too long, my days had ever been too full of incident to allow me to settle down as a boorish squire. The castle, a great Norman structure of moss-covered grey stone, was too ancient and solitary, too vast and gloomy. The woods, though beautiful. were too tame, too dull. The sport was good, but how could a man be contented with shooting defenceless partridges whose dearest pristine pastime had consisted in the balancing a glittering sword in deadly converse with an armed opponent? How be content to strive against a paltry speckled fish who had been wont to measure wits with men and sharp-tongued dames? It might have been, I told myself, had Clarisse been satisfied to share my exile, I should have grown resigned to rusticate. But Clarisse was in France or Belgium, perhaps wed by this!

In a month I was consumed with restless longing for other things—anything but that peaceful, humdrum, infernal, eternal calm. I was, moreover, incessantly harassed with thoughts of Mademoiselle d'Arras. Where was she? What did she? How fared she? Did she think of me? and the like. I was not a man to waste away for unrequited love,

but, nevertheless, I could not efface her picture from my mind. I could rail at her, revile her for a jilt, a damned coquette, but cease loving her I could not! I grew taciturn and gloomy, going often for long solitary rambles into the quiet woods, and returning after nightfall, wearied and aching, to sleep, but, alas! never too wearied to dream. Misfortunately in all my dreams Clarisse was kind, therefore awakening was a thing to be dreaded. There were times when I sighed for some of De Sevringen's Italian paste, so that I might have composed myself once and for all to rest and dreams from which there might be no arousing. But my body was too strong and vigorous to allow me harbour such sick-brained thoughts for long, and in better moments I sneered at myself for a silly, love-sick fool. Towards the end of the second month of my sojourn I felt the need of some society quite apart from the mere restlessness of dreaming inaction. I had always been accustomed to have much to do with women, and women there were in London who would have welcomed my return: flames of other days who at a nod would have been flames again. Richards was the stumbling-block. He loved the country and flourished like a bay tree. Every morning he would greet me with a flourish of ravishing encomiums passed on our rural modes and manners, the delights-God save the mark!-of country life.

At first I had agreed with him honestly enough,

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since the novelty was charming for a while, but later, from a coward fear of disappointing the lad, or incurring his scorn for a wind-cock, mindless creature, I had continued to agree with him—by lip—hating the business at heart like the devil, and only waiting for a decent excuse to flit back townwards. Ridiculous as it may appear, the fear of Richards's scorn kept me chained to that dull castle long after I was sick to death of it. But at last came the order for my release.

News travelled to us only at odd intervals in Devonshire. I never read the *Times*, holding it for a mere Government tool, so I was compelled to rely for all important intelligence on Richards, who garnered the same from the village tavern, and the rascal carefully edited whatever information he vouchsafed me, fearing above all things to excite my military sentiments and so cut short our rural idyll. This I learned long after. But one morning came a courier to the castle with a manuscript, under formidable seal, from the Prime Minister himself.

'My LORD,' it said,—' You will be grieved to learn that His Most Gracious Majesty's old affliction has lately reassumed proportions most alarming. It has become necessary, then, for the Government, of which I am unworthily the head, to adopt expedients sanctioned by the precedents of similar unhappy accidents of fate. But on this occasion we are

hampered by the cries of malcontented Oppositionists, and at a time when surely the ship of State has never more sorely needed the coherent administration of all its company. It pleasures me to feel convinced that this Government has earned the support, during difficult and dangerous times, of all good compatriots. However, my health has long been failing, and I need, as never before, the cooperation of all friends. Your seat, my lord, as a Peer of the Realm, has long rested unoccupied. A division is expected to eventuate on Thursday evening. On Friday I should dearly like to hear from you, in person, that you have cast your fortunes in my favour.

'With kind greetings, believe me, my Lord, faithfully your servant, CHATHAM.'

Ha! I could face Richards now. The rogue stood covertly watching me from the corners of his eyes, and he did not appear to be overpleased at the joyful expression which I did not trouble to conceal.

- 'Anything important, my lord?' he anxiously inquired.
- 'The noble Earl of Chatham has sent for me,' I answered magniloquently. 'He requires my assistance in a great political crisis.'
 - 'And you will render it, my lord?'
- 'Most certainly; I am under heavy obligations to the Prime Minister.'

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'H'm,' muttered Richards, with an angry sniff, 'for his kindness in putting you in gaol, I suppose?'

It was an opportunity which I had long desired, and the energy that I put into the trouncing which I forthwith administered to the rascal both pleased and astonished me, for it presaged a new interest in living, a return from the tomb of misanthropic musings and regrets to the world of action, the only existence which I was properly suited for.

On Friday morning, at a little before noon, I presented myself at the house of Pitt, and on this occasion I found that the name of 'Devenac' was an open sesame. No more was I kept dangling in ante-rooms or corridors, but obsequious lackeys reverenced before me, and for the moment that I was forced to wait Polkinghorne himself, whose victorious visage was a picture of his master's triumph of the previous evening, kept me company and barred dulness from my mind. was bubbling over with the joy of Fox's latest defeat, and overflowing with numerous accounts of that statesman's discomfiture. Also, to my surprise, he exhibited unmistakable symptoms of seeking my friendship. I confess I felt a stranger to such overtures, and, I fear, was cold to his Later on, however, I grew more acadvances. customed to being treated kindly by Society, and it did not take me very long to learn that the world has a knack of never remembering those

sins of a rich man committed before the time when he acquired his riches. Well, I have no occasion to sneer at the world for that, rather to feel grateful, since the shortest possible memory could never have disadvantaged my desires.

The great Pitt greeted me with what the French call empressement. He expressed himself as profoundly grateful for my prompt attention to his request, and assured me that my example had been of great service in influencing several undecided and wavering peers to give him their allegiance. This, I believe, to have been a polite fiction, but he was so plainly desirous of showing himself my friend that I had no thought of contradicting him. After a few moments he dismissed his attendants, to one of whom he gave some whispered direction, and, sitting down, he requested the indulgence of a few minutes' private chat, as he wished to ask my advice on a certain matter. I confess he completely amazed me. Prime Minister should require the confidential assistance of so lately whitewashed a scapegrace as myself, it must be admitted, was a proposition sufficiently startling. However, I tried to assume the demeanour of a reverend seigneur, one long used to discussing counsels of State, and the advising of kings. Pitt, I am sure, must have been amused at my solemn, pompous visage; but I think he was too weary to laugh at me, too much

wrapped up in multitudinous, overwhelming cares. It gave me a thrill of pity to mark his face, so wan it was, so world-worn and haggard. Death seemed to hover about him, to nestle in the bluish hollows of his eyes, to hang, a threatening phantom, leaning on his shoulder, dictating his thoughts, directing his hopes, his aspirations, ever pointing a lean and warning finger to the clock on the wall, which ticked on sullenly, its each movement a hammer-beat to drive a nail into the coffin of the greatest of England's sons. And Pitt was not unconscious of his approaching end. He marked my glance, and, with unerring skill, read my thoughts aloud.

'You are right, lad,' he said with a sickly smile; 'the physicians say it is a matter of months with me; but they are wrong, I have not many days.'

I was shocked beyond measure, but I forced myself to respond brightly, 'You are ill now, my lord, and think despondently, being overworked. Rest is what you need; a little rest, and you will spend years in England's service yet.'

He shrugged his shoulders and waved his hand as if to banish the subject from each of our minds.

'Ah, well,' he said kindly, 'never mind for me; but for yourself, my lord. You are yet a young man—a man of many parts and talents, and of

ambition, too, if I mistake not. Have you never thought of a political career? It seems to me that you would do well in politics.'

His words opened up for me a new vista, causing new, perhaps long-dormant, aspirations to come to sudden birth within me.

'It is what I should like of all things,' I cried briskly, and with an earnestness that astonished myself.

Pitt sighed. 'The peer or the rich man who idles is but a poor creature,' he said wearily. 'You have given me the answer I expected. Well, what say, my lord? Will you cast in your lot with me? I can promise you the Naval Secretaryship, which is vacant since the impeachment of Lord Melville. It is a post of great responsibility, which will give you but paltry leisure hours; but if you are, as I take you, capable, energetic and ambitious, it will not displeasure you on that account.'

I was overwhelmed and, indeed, touched to the heart at this proof of the great Pitt's kindness for me. I, an untried politician, lately a scamp at whom all England looked askance, to be thus offered advancement which many a hoary member of either House would have given his right hand to obtain.

'My lord,' I stammered brokenly, 'your goodness unmans me, but sink me if I ever prove unworthy of your confidence.'

Pitt smiled most kindly. 'I am already satisfied of that. Henceforth we are colleagues, lad; for you must commence your new duties almost at once. I, myself, shall instal you. But, for the present, there is an affair I would mention. It runs in my memory that you spoke to me of marriage. Well, my lord, politicians should be married. I have always held with that. It inspires a confidence in their stability which no other circumstance may give.'

'Marriage,' I stammered.

'Just so, my boy, and I must congratulate you upon your choice. Mademoiselle d'Arras is a beautiful young woman. French, certainly, but loyalist—indeed, by birth, a princess, therefore you can take no disadvantage from her nationality—and then her face, ah'm! to a vast degree prepossessing! Politicians should all marry pretty women, Devenac; they can be made of service—of great service, indeed, provided, of course, they be not over clever; but then, fortunately, the skulls of pretty women seldom contain an overplus of brains.'

I tried in vain to interrupt him. I could not speak for a while, however, only blush and stammer foolishly.

'The fact is, my lord,' I blurted out at last, "Mademoiselle d'Arras has jilted me. I pray you let us drop the subject of marriage.' 'Eh, what?' he cried, eyeing me sharply. 'Jilted you! You were not foolish enough to love her, lad?'

I turned away my face. 'Ay, and worse—I trusted her!'

Pitt tapped the table with his fingers. 'Ah,' he murmured, 'you were not wise there, Devenac; the man who trusts a woman too far backs the favourite in a race where the prize is disappointment. But tell me, lad, where is the lady now?'

'God knows!' I answered gloomily. 'In Belgium, in France, in England, I care not.'

'Or try not to care, Devenac-which?'

I laughed hoarsely. 'Oh, I shall recover, I daresay, but the thing is still fresh, and I am fool enough to feel the sting of it. But I have taken up a great deal of your lordship's time'—and I arose, for a servant announced, at that moment, Mr Addington.

'Stay a moment,' said Pitt. 'I have still a matter to discuss with you—nay, rather will you wait for me a little while in my privy room yonder?—there, through that door. I must see Addington, for his business is urgent. Do you mind, my lord?'

'It is a pleasure,' I answered, and with a bow crossed the apartment and passed into the next room. It was a library, cunningly tricked out with shelves, whereon reposed a multitude of law books and reports. But I did not look at these things very long or closely, for the room contained a far more

splendid ornament—a woman elegantly attired, who stood with her back to me, a woman whose picture was engraved in my heart of hearts, whose every attitude and attribute was printed indelibly in my memory.

'Clarisse!' I cried, hoarse with surprise, hardly daring to credit my sense's evidence, half fearful she was but a vision.

She did not move from her position, but slightly turned her head to regard me with a cold and angry glance which cut me to the heart.

'Clarisse!' I cried again, and advanced with hesitating step. Not daring to touch her, I stood vainly trying to read her eyes, but always she turned her back upon me, and in petulant mood tapped the carpet with her foot.

'Clarisse! darling Clarisse!' I murmured in her ear, 'have pity on me, for I love you, dear.'

- 'Don't speak to me,' she muttered; 'you said you were a fool to care. Oh, I heard you!'
 - 'What! you were here, you were listening!'
 - 'You said you were a fool to trust me,' said Clarisse.
- 'And so I was,' I cried, a feeling of rapture covering me with a rush of happy warmth, 'a fool ever to have trusted you one moment from my arms—a fool ever to have let you leave me for an instant, little witch!'

And as I spoke I caught her in my arms and forced her to meet my eyes.

'I hate you,' she muttered, struggling vainly to escape.

I kissed her on the lips. 'A wicked feeling, dear, that is your punishment,' and held her closer still.

'To leave me two months lonely,' she panted.
'Ah, Caryl, it was cruel of you!'

'You wicked girl! the fault was yours, not mine. I thought you had left England. Why did you deceive me so?'

- 'Because!' she answered, pouting most bewitchingly.
- 'Tell me, answer me, you witch!'

'Not yet; first kiss me, dear. Ah, make me feel your arms, monsieur; I have so longed for them, so longed for you!'

Tears gleamed on her long lashes, and her sweet lips trembled as she spoke. I did not need a second bidding, but rained hot kisses on her eyes, her mouth, her chin, her very nose, so that she struggled from me at the last, panting and palpitating, a perfect picture, to a lover's eyes at least.

'Tell me, sweet,' I whispered presently, 'the reason of your strange unkindness; you did not cease to love me, dear?'

'I loved you overmuch,' she muttered tenderly.

'Then why, why?' I stammered, all a-wonder. But holding up her hand for silence, she stepped away, and half turned from me, her lips apart as if to speak, then with a sudden, ardent look rushed back into my arms again.

'Ah' dear,' she cried, 'you have had so many lovers, and I have had none but you. Tell me, Caryl, did you kiss the others as you kiss me?'

- 'No, little woman, I never loved the others.'
- 'But you kissed them?' jealously.
- 'I was a wicked fool, sweetheart, for I loved none of them.'
- 'Ah!' she sighed, gazing up at me reproachfully. 'You are very cruel, you men; you waste yourselves on those you do not, or say you do not, love, then when real love comes—but am I your real love, Caryl—truly—really?'
 - 'Ah, yes, Clarisse!'

'How can you then make up to me?' She forced herself from me, breathing hard. 'You have given yourself to so many others. Ah, when I think of it, it hurts, it pains me so. When I see a beautiful woman whom I do not know, I ask myself the question, "Perhaps she has been the lover of my love; she has received his kisses, mayhap returned them; she has rested on his heart?" Caryl, it kills me to think these things. How can you make up to me for all you have wasted that should be mine—mine, I tell you?'

She looked so sweet an angel in her passion and distress that I was half distraught, and, too, a little shamed, for she was virgin white, and I—ah, me! I felt I had no right to kiss her shoe.

'Sweet,' I muttered humbly. 'I pray you try

forget the past; it is a vain remembering. The future may be ours, and that I vow to you, now and for ever if you will. I am not worthy of your love, dear one, but on my honour, sweet, I love you worthily, and if you give yourself into my keeping, my life shall be spent in loving you. Dare you trust me, dear?'

But Clarisse, the woman, came to me, slowly, step by step, her arms outstretched, her great eyes shining tenderly, and she placed her two small hands in mine.

'Caryl,' she whispered, 'I give myself to you.'

I fell on my knee and reverently, humbly kissed her hands.

But she drew me to her with a jealous cry.

'Ah, no, monsieur, you must not kneel to me,' and nestled in my arms.

'Dear, when shall it be?' I muttered in a moment.

'Our marriage?' she faltered, blushing like a

'Ay, sweet.'

She hid her face in my breast. 'Soon, very soon. Ah, marry me soon, monsieur; I cannot wait for long.'

'Why should we wait at all, sweet? Why not to-morrow?'

'Why not to-day?' It was a whisper softer than a breath, but I caught it, and it set the blood a-jingle in my veins.

Pitt at the door, who, it seems, had been regarding us some time in silence, must have heard it too, for he broke into a merry, ringing laugh which sent us swift apart.

'Eh!' he cried, 'and why not to-day, my lord? Mademoiselle is a young woman wise in her generation, who has already learned the danger of delays, and having learned, would profit by the lesson; why not to-day, young man?'

'The sooner the better!' I cried blithely, and in spite of the Prime Minister's presence slipped an arm round the girl's waist.

He regarded my action with a gentle smile, a glance half pathetic, half quizzical.

'Grant me this favour,' he said a minute later, and he sighed as he spoke. 'Let the marriage take place this evening at my house, and let me give the bride away.'

'It is good for politicians to marry,' flashed Clarisse. 'It inspires a confidence in their stability.'

'Precisely,' interrupted Pitt, smiling to hear his own words so returned. 'A confidence which no other circumstance can give. I thought you would agree with me, my dear.'

'But, yes—what would you? How could I disagree with one so wise and good?' Her courtesy was a study of coquettish art.

'The gentleman reflects, madam; he is silent.

Can it be that he is timorous? Perchance he plots rebellion or escape!'

I bowed profoundly. 'You are my chief, sir, and may, of course, dispose of me. I am ready to obey.'

'Indeed, a gracious, dutiful, obedient pair,' said Pitt, his eyes agleam with kindly satire. 'So be it, then!'

And so it was.

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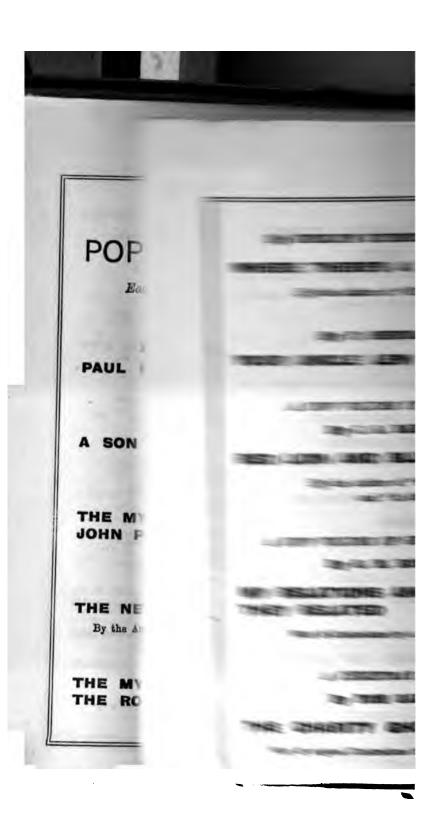
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